

Written by Oyuki Konno

Illustrated by Reine Hibiki

Translated by Enn are

Editing from Baka-Tsuki

Typesetting by Saveric

COBALT-SERIES

今野緒雪

パラソルをさして

アリア様があさる

Volume 11

Holding a Parasol

Prologue

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary's garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field's greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Even though she knew, on the day she accepted the rosary, that they weren't evenly matched soeurs.

Even though she had thought, on occasion, that maybe someday her onee-sama would grow tired of her, or be scandalized, and decide that they could no longer be soeurs.

But still.

For it to be like this, with her onee-sama closing her mouth, turning her back and distancing herself.

She hadn't thought she be so simply handed off to someone else, with a "Sorry for troubling you with her."

"That's enough already," had, most certainly, been running away. The complete opposite of the feeling of wanting to chase.

More than anything, she wanted to be shown that she was the most important.

If it was going to come to this, she should have just put it into words.

Onee-sama, I love you. I want to be with you forever and ever.

But now, her voice wouldn't carry.

With her wet body housing her cooled heart, all she could do was cry in the rain like an abandoned kitten.

The Girl with the Brown Umbrella

Part 1.

The cars sparkled as they skimmed along the road hazy with rain.

It wasn't yet 4pm, but the area was dark and the street lights, traffic lights and car lights all reflected off the thin membrane of water on the asphalt, making it look like a night view of the city.

To that extent, it was quite beautiful.

The glittering of the tears that spilled from her eyes added the finishing touches to the whimsical scene. – Quite ironic.

If she stayed like that, forever struck by the rain, perhaps she could disappear.

Along with her despairing thoughts, she could disappear.

For the last half-year, Yumi had always been looking at her onee-sama. Her eyes had been following her onee-sama, her ears searching for her onee-sama's voice, her lips had quivered with delight as she offered up words of dedication to her onee-sama. Even her straightenable sailor tie looked forward to the touch of her onee-sama's fingertips.

Ogasawara Sachiko-sama colored Yumi's everyday life. Flowers, jewels, hand knitted lace and perfume were all treasures whose color would fade. No-one made her heart throb with anticipation so. Surely a second such person would never appear.

So to be cast aside by such a wonderful onee-sama, did that mean she no longer had any value whatsoever?

She wasn't thinking in such realistic terms as life or death, she just wanted to disappear.

If Sachiko-sama no longer needed her, then she wanted to remove herself from Sachiko-sama's presence. And if she were to still feel this way for Sachiko-sama despite being cast aside, then she wanted her heart removed from this world too.

The rain chilled her body. Yumi crouched, hugging her shoulders.

The glittering road was like the twinkling stars. Although the actual sky was blanketed with thick clouds, so there was nothing to see at that moment.

"Yumi-chan."

An umbrella was held over her from behind. Sei-sama's gentle voice brought Yumi back to reality.

She was now so wet that holding an umbrella over her was kind of pointless, but by looking up at Sei-sama's face inside the large, men's umbrella, some of her reckless thoughts were drawn out.

Like, here was a person who cared deeply for her. And if she were to disappear from this world, then so too would the kindness that this person showed her.

"One of my friends is boarding near here. She said we could go to her place."

Sei-sama swiveled her head towards the gate. And there she saw a large brown umbrella, which the lady in civilian clothes holding it dipped, probably intended as a bow.

"But."

"If you stay like that, you'll catch a cold. Besides, don't you think it'll be a bit rough to catch two buses home looking like that?"

When she heard this, Yumi took another look at herself. It looked like she'd had a bucket of water dumped on her. Water dripped from her two hair bunches like from a faulty faucet, and her triple-folded socks were so covered in mud that they looked like dalmatians.

From the tip of her head to the soles of her feet. There was no doubt that she had an eye-catching appearance.

"..."

"She made the offer herself, so you don't have to worry."

Being told not to worry by a third-party. To begin with, Yumi was little more than a passer-by to the girl with the brown umbrella.

"I'm grateful for your concern for me. But, I – "

She turned her back, intending to finish with, "would prefer to be left alone." She grabbed the handle of her folding umbrella, gritty from the mud, and used all her strength to force it open. Sei-sama then regarded Yumi coolly as she said:

"If you're absolutely against it, then I'll have to take you back to your place myself."

"Huh!?"

She put too much force into it, and the umbrella turned inside out, so Yumi hastily closed it and turned around.

"Isn't it obvious? Of course I'm worried about whether you'll get home properly. And I'll have to explain about what happened to your family."

"..."

Since she had an umbrella, her mother would surely be surprised if she arrived home in her current condition. The Fukuzawa family weren't the kind of hands-off people that would be satisfied with an explanation of, "It's nothing," and sooner or later would drag the truth out of her.

And that would be a problem. She didn't want her family to know about things with Sachiko-sama.

She didn't want to make Sachiko-sama out to be the bad guy, and it would be too wretched to talk about how she'd been cast aside.

Speaking of wretched.

The sight of her continuing to struggle to get her umbrella to open was fairly wretched too.

"Satou-san, can I say something?"

The girl with the brown umbrella approached and spoke. Her long hair reached to her shoulders. She had almond eyes beneath her black rimmed glasses, and her thin lips were exquisite.

"Ahh, Yumi-san ... was it? You don't have to be so reserved. I live alone, although the place is fairly small."

"Umm – "

Even after getting a good look at her, Yumi didn't recognize the girl at all. Since she'd called Sei-sama 'Satou-san,' it seemed likely that she was a graduate of a different high-school.

"You're well enough to walk about two bus stops distance from here, right?"

"Ah, yes."

"Alright, let's go then."

"Huh!?"

But the girl with the brown umbrella had already started walking off along the footpath. She had apparently interpreted Yumi's answer of "Yes" to the question of whether she could walk two bus stops distance to mean an acceptance of the offer to enter her house.

"Come on, let's go."

Sei-sama took Yumi's umbrella by the handle, and with a practiced action quickly opened it for her.

"Here, take a look behind. You don't want to become a spectacle, do you?"

When she heard this, Yumi became acutely aware that among the students around the school gates and bus stop, there were some who were looking dubiously in her direction.

Indeed, it would be odd for those gathered near the school gates to see a student getting soaked holding an unopened umbrella and not think, "What's going on?" And since she was Rosa Chinensis en bouton, it was only natural that she would garner even more attention.

"Right, Yumi-chan?"

"... Yeah."

In this situation, getting out of there as soon as possible was imperative. Yumi took hold of her red umbrella and followed after Sei-sama.

Although they were quarreling, in everyone else's eyes Yumi was still Ogasawara Sachiko-sama's petit soeur. She didn't want to bring shame to her onee-sama right at the very end. The fewer bad memories, the better.

She continued walking down the road she usually took home by bus, her footsteps heavy and her uniform heavy and dripping the rain it had absorbed.

Her umbrella was still crunchy from the dirt, or silt, and streaked with muddy water, but now it was providing her with shelter from the falling rain and at least the mud was washing away from the outside as she walked along holding it.

They walked single-file along the narrow footpath beside the road.

The rain wasn't falling as heavily as before, but it hadn't reached the level where an umbrella was unnecessary. It was light, but it looked as though the weather had resigned itself to a protracted campaign.

In front of her was Sei-sama's black umbrella. And in front of her was the kindhearted university student, name unknown, with the brown umbrella.

Yumi mentally apologized to its owner, but the brown umbrella appearing and disappearing behind Sei-sama reminded her of a shiitake mushroom. With that in mind, Sei-sama's black umbrella resembled a cloud ear mushroom, in shape at least. It looked exactly like the way water flowed off a cloud ear mushroom when it was being prepared for cooking.

(Oh ... ?)

Yumi smiled instinctively, then was a bit surprised when she realized that she was coping well enough to smile.

Perhaps people are in possession of many hundreds of impudent nerves that fired on their own. If she really was being backed into a corner, surely she wouldn't pay attention to something like someone else's umbrella.

Mentally she might be in a bad state due to things with Sachiko-sama, but Yumi's body was tediously putting one foot in front of the other. And, without any orders to do so, her mind had started thinking on its own. Desiring stimulus from the outside world, her eyes and ears had been put to use.

Her body was in good condition.

The wound was solely in her heart, although there was no direct damage to the flesh.

Then, what of this heart?

Perhaps it didn't reside in her chest.

Yumi raised her arm that was carrying her school bag slightly and touched her chest with the back of her hand. When she thought of her heart, why did it feel like it existed within her chest?

(– There, see)

In the end, she kept thinking about it this way. It seemed the chest was boring too.

(Mm.)

As she watched the shiitake mushroom umbrella, Yumi was struck by a thought.

When she'd seen them earlier, had an umbrella of that color been in the group that surrounded Sei-sama?

Pink floral pattern, navy blue checks, yellow stripes or polka dots – she could remember those umbrellas, but there was no memory of a brown umbrella. In the first place, Sei-sama's umbrella had stood out because it was the only men's umbrella mixed in with the women's umbrellas. And when she looked at it closer, the dimensions of the brown umbrella were almost identical to Sei-sama's, making it a men's umbrella.

"Sei-sama."

Yumi called out to the cloud ear mushroom umbrella.

"Mmm."

"That lady ... your friend, what should I call her?"

"Huh?"

"You know, what's her name?"

It was hard to speak in a way that she would be heard by Sei-sama, but not by the person in front of Sei-sama. And yet, Sei-sama turned her back towards Yumi. The design of the ears was such that they were better at catching information from in front.

The end result.

"Hmm? Sorry, I can't really hear you, ask me later okay?"

And, just like that, Sei-sama shut Yumi out, so she wasn't able to learn anything about this kind university student. Yumi was being supported by someone whose name she still didn't know.

After walking slightly less than two stops distance, they turned a corner. They left the main road and entered into a housing district, then walked another couple of hundred metres before arriving at the girl's lodging.

"Well, come inside."

The sight of the brown umbrella closing slightly and the woman holding it enter through the gates made Yumi blink. No matter how she looked at it, this was a detached house. And it looked like a splendid one at that. The wooden main gate was so large it could be mistaken for a wall, and the gate had a door within it that was used to enter.

"Mmm."

Sei-sama seemed to find this a bit unexpected too.

After taking in the ancient looking wooden gates, she murmured.

"This place, ... umm."

When she'd heard the word 'boarding,' Yumi had pictured a cramped apartment. Although, it was certainly possible that the girl was renting a single room in a detached house. In that case, maybe it wasn't a problem that she was bringing home a dripping wet high-school student.

"Sei-sama, umm – "

Yumi had instinctively grabbed on to Sei-sama's arm when it was offered to her.

"Pardon our intrusion."

Sei-sama went inside, following the brown umbrella.

"Ahh, hold on."

No time for indecision. Yumi hurriedly followed along.

Now that they'd finally made it here, there was no going back. Even though it was close to Lillian's Girls Academy, this was unknown territory to

Yumi, since she only ever got off the bus at school. If she were left alone here, even if the weather had been fine and it was mid-afternoon, she'd have been a bit helpless.

Once inside the premises, they continued along a paved path.

"You don't have to be so hesitant. My room's separate from the main building. See, it's over there."

Yumi followed where the owner of the brown umbrella was pointing, and at the end of the path was a small building. Next to it, the main building towered overhead, imposing.

"Wait here a moment. I'll just inform the landlady then be back."

She didn't go to the front door of the main building right in front of them, instead continuing along a stone path through the garden and gently tapping on the wooden frame of one of the main building's windows. Someone inside responded by opening the window. Since the garden was quite large, Yumi couldn't really make out the landlady, but from the general ambience she got the impression that it was an elderly lady.

"Okay. Come on through."

The girl said, upon her return. Apparently they'd been given the go-ahead.

"Boys are forbidden. Girls are allowed, but I have to get the landlady's permission."

"That seems strict."

"If it wasn't like that, it'd just become a gathering spot since it's so close to school, right?"

"Ah, I get it."

They continued along the paved path.

The garden, whether by design or just by nature, looked like a piece of pristine woodlands at the base of a small hill. The ground by the stone path was clear, but further in there was a solid covering of either grass or weeds, Yumi didn't know enough to say which, and the tall trees were all entwined with creeping vines.

The thin curtain across the front of the window of the main building that the landlady had been at opened slightly, and Yumi saw a grandmotherly woman regarding them.

"Pardon our intrusion."

Yumi instinctively stopped and bowed deeply, and that lady hastily closed the curtain.

"Huh? What is it?"

Sei-sama, who had been walking a few steps ahead of Yumi, turned around and asked.

"Nothing ... just now, someone – "

"Someone? The landlady?"

Sei-sama asked, meaning to greet her. But now, it was too late when she looked. The curtain had already been drawn back across the window, and it was made of such thin material that they could tell there was no-one behind it.

"What's the matter? Come on in."

The girl with the brown umbrella had unlocked her door and beckoned them over.

"Okay."

Sei-sama and Yumi both responded, and walked along the stone path.

On the way there, Yumi stopped to have another look back, but the curtain across that window remained closed.

Part 2.

The warm shower seeped into her entire body.

Apparently she'd been colder than she thought. She seemed to remember that when she stepped on to the dry mat in the bathroom, and even when she entered the shower before she'd started the water running, she thought of herself as being lukewarm rather than cold.

Which meant that the person who lived here, the "Girl with the Brown Umbrella," had probably been correct in insisting she went straight to the shower, and not giving Yumi an opportunity to argue.

When Yumi had hesitated, Sei-sama had said, "Hurry up or I'll have to take your clothes off you myself," which she thought wasn't meant as a joke, but out of concern for her cold body. At any rate, that sexually harassing comment had undoubtedly spurred her into the shower.

"Yumi-chan. I've left a bath towel and change of underwear here for you."

The girl with the brown umbrella called out to her from in the dressing room. Yumi really did have to ask for her name, but since she hadn't taken the opportunity when they first met, the ideal time to do so hadn't seemed to come around again.

"... Thanks."

After expressing her gratitude, Yumi was assailed by conflicting emotions.

Since she was in the bathroom and completely under the shower, Yumi was, for the time being, not wearing any clothes. In her birthday suit, completely bare, stark naked. There were many ways to say it, but basically, she was nude. It had been relatively daring of her to take off her wet and heavy school uniform in the closed off dressing room, but her underwear had been a bit of a problem.

She hadn't brought a change of underwear.

Her bra and slip weren't as wet as the uniform, but they weren't the sort of things she wanted to wear twice without washing them either.

What to do, Yumi?

Yumi regretfully thought that she should have stopped and bought a new pair at a convenience store, but that's not the sort of thing that anyone thinks of until they're in just such a predicament. She could wash them now. But then, what to wear while they were drying? Plus the lace on the hem of her slip was wet from the rain.

She'd been pondering this while she had her shower, so she was grateful when she heard the phrase 'change of underwear.' But what was she going to do if they were like Sachiko-sama's gorgeous lingerie (to lump them together with mere 'underwear' would be demeaning). It would be fine if they were something she could use her pocket money to buy a replacement for, but – .

So, when she opened the frosted glass door to the dressing room, there was a bath towel and change of clothes waiting for her in a clothes basket.

There was a pair of 100% cotton boyshorts and an undershirt, both still with the creases from when they'd been purchased, and a gray sweatsuit that, while not new, had the faint aroma of washing powder.

Alone in the changing room, she bowed her head and said thanks, then got changed. The dry clothes, and the warmth when she put them on, made Yumi feel like she was wearing people's kindness, and once again she was moved to tears.

As for the unpleasant state of her body, perhaps that had been because her heart had been leading it in a negative direction. Yumi liked to think that she usually kept herself neat and tidy.

But the way she acted when driven to desperation couldn't have been all that desirable. Yumi suddenly remembered the hands of her onnee-sama fixing her tie.

"Are you nice and warm? I guess a bath would have been better, even though it takes longer."

Yumi came out of the bathroom and saw her school uniform hanging by a window. The girl with the brown umbrella was carefully wiping a damp cloth along the pleats of her skirt, to remove the mud stains.

"Ah, yeah. I'm plenty warm. Thank-you."

"Okay, that's good. Pick somewhere to sit and rest."

While the girl was still talking, Yumi sat down on one of the zabuton cushions by the low table. A modern table wouldn't have cushions. But this was a traditional table, and so had the traditional cushions to accompany it.

Sei-sama was standing in the kitchen doing something. If it was the same as this room, then it would be a traditional kitchen too.

"Umm – "

"You don't have to worry about the change of underwear, if that's what you were going to say. They're a gift, so you can take them home. It would be more of a problem if you left them."

"..."

Indeed.

"I bought a stack of them from the 100-yen shop for when my friends stay the night. But this kind of situation's an even better use for them. Right?"

"...Yeah."

So 200 yen total, plus tax. Of course, this didn't represent the full amount of her kindness, but it was still an important consideration that she not be out of pocket for these items. Naturally, the fewer times something like today happened, the better.

Inside her purse, Yumi had a couple of hundred yen coins. But if she were to get them out now, the girl in front of her would surely take offense. So for the time being, Yumi decided it was better to be humbly grateful.

The girl with the brown umbrella had finished cleaning the dirt off the outside of Yumi's school uniform, and started drying it with a hair-dryer.

"It's lovely to look at, but there must be all kinds of difficulties having a dress as a school uniform."

She murmured some examples, like putting it on and taking it off, repairing it, and so on.

"Ah, I'll do that. Sorry, I should have noticed earlier."

When Yumi rushed over, the girl held the dryer up high, out of her reach.

"It's okay. I can do it ... rather, I want to do it."

It wasn't said with a grin, but that was the impression it gave. Come to think of it, she didn't seem to smile all that often.

"Yeah, let her do it. She seems much more handy than you, Yumi-chan."

Sei-sama had returned from the kitchen, and stood behind Yumi, offering her a mug.

"Hot cocoa. With extra sugar for Yumi-chan."

Yumi took the offered cup with her hand that had been reaching out for the hair dryer and settled back into her previous position.

"... Thank-you."

It was sweet and delicious. Sei-sama had complete knowledge of Yumi's tastes. So there was no way she'd make a mistake.

Yumi had to say that they couldn't keep pampering her like this. But, right then, she couldn't.

She wanted to stay immersed in that warmth and sweetness for just a little while longer. She thought they'd understand.

"I'll leave yours here."

Sei-sama left a cup for the girl with the brown umbrella atop the low table, then sat beside Yumi.

The rain was still coming down. But it was so quiet that Yumi couldn't pick out the sound of the rain. Perhaps her ears had simply become accustomed to it.

"This is so relaxing."

Sei-sama murmured, talking to herself, as she slowly sipped the contents of her teacup and looked up at the ceiling.

"... Yeah."

Yumi voiced her agreement. If she were to put a name on it, then 'relaxing' would indeed be the most fitting term.

Taking another look around, it was an odd residence.

It was separate from the main building, they weren't even connected by a covered walkway, making it a completely independent building. But having said that, it wasn't simplistic, like a pre-fabricated children's study area. From the outside, the tiles on the roof made it look like a normal, albeit small, house.

From the entrance, the layout of the house gave the impression of a studio apartment. Kitchen, toilet, bathroom all off to the side of a single main room. If the flooring was wooden, then it would be a typical western-style studio apartment, but this room was six tatami mats of pure Japanese style.

Even so, it didn't feel like a modern reproduction of a traditional Japanese house either. It looked like it had been built in the 1950s or 60s, and maintained as-is since then. Yumi had seen a photo collection composed entirely of houses like this on her father's bookshelf.

"Oh right, Sei-sama."

Yumi tugged on the shirt sleeve beside her and whispered.

"Mm?"

"Umm, my earlier – "

"Earlier? Ah, right."

As she said this, Sei-sama turned her face to the girl by the window, drying Yumi's school uniform.

"Say, Yumi-chan asked me, "What's your name?""

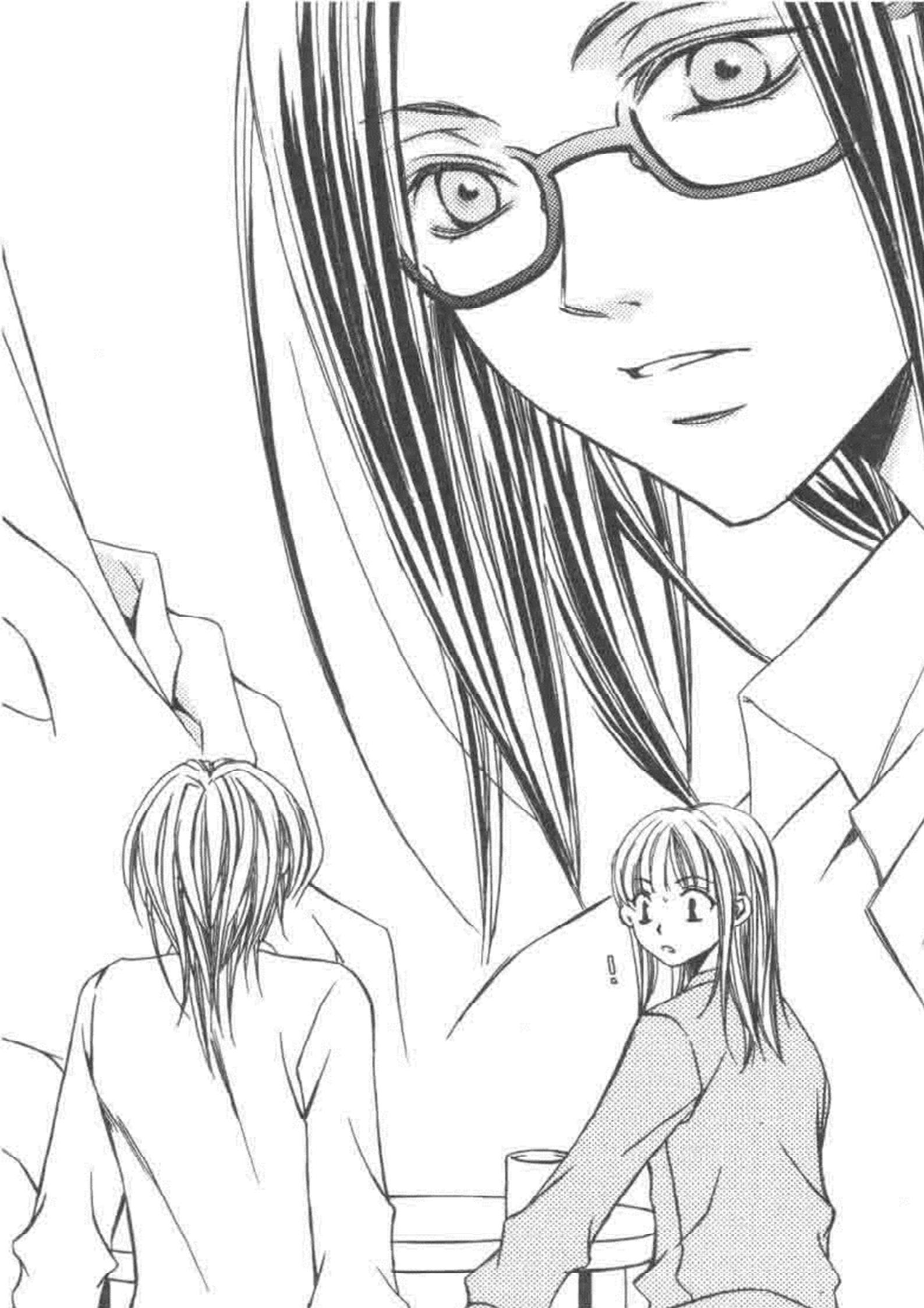
"!"

Sei-sama, what are you doing? Couldn't you have just answered quietly? If Yumi was going to ask the girl herself, she would have done it more tactfully.

"Ah."

The girl switched off the hair-dryer and bowed.

"Sorry, I haven't introduced myself. I'm Katou. Katou Kei."



"... Katou, Kei."

Oooh. It was practically the same as a certain someone's name. – As she was thinking this, before she could say anything:

"Ah!"

That certain someone called out.

"So, you're Katou Kei, huh ... !"

"Yeah."

Not understanding, Yumi compared the two expressions. The two expressions belonging to Satou Sei-san and Katou-Kei-san, obviously.

While Sei-sama's face showed an undercurrent of profound surprise, Katou Kei-san's face had hardly changed, her smile showing traces of amazement and exasperation.

"Satou-san. Did you, perhaps, come here even though you didn't know who I was?"

"Ooooh ... !"

Without thinking, Yumi cried out.

That was it.

The one called Satou Sei-sama was indeed that kind of person.

Part 3.

She thought, "What's with that?"

Yes, she was her senior, someone she respected and loved, and who was always helping her out. But setting all that aside, Yumi wanted to say, "You really are weird, aren't you?" to the person right beside her.

Yumi had accepted the invitation into this house because she'd been told that it came from Sei-sama's friend. What impulse made Sei-sama bring her drenched junior to the house of someone whose name she didn't even know? Surely there are limits to impudence. – Indeed, Yumi found it almost impossible to remain where she was any longer.

"I'd seen your face around, and you called me Satou-san. Besides."

Sei-sama wasn't acting shy as she gulped her milk- and sugar-free cocoa.

"Drying off Yumi-chan was my number one priority."

Hearing that was tough. The main culprit was herself. But even if it was with the benefit of hindsight, perhaps she should have been suspicious of their friendship when she'd seen Sei-sama standing in the kitchen.

"So, then, Katou-san – "

Why had she called out to Sei-sama, who she wasn't particularly close to, and been so accommodating of her junior? Until now, Yumi had been under the impression that Katou-san was well acquainted with Sei-sama, and had seen caring for her as an extension of caring for Sei-sama.

"It's not like I wouldn't have called out if it was just Satou-san by herself. Or an unknown high-schooler for that matter."

It wasn't quite a soothing tone, but Katou-san spun her words in a slow and detached manner. Hair-dryer in one hand. Now she was directing the airflow at the skirt pleats.

"And although I didn't know the details, I felt I had to lend a hand."

"So wise."

Like someone flipping mochi cakes, Satou-san entered the conversation with exquisite timing.

"It looked like the girl crying in the rain relied on you. It changed my opinion of you, Satou-san. You're not just some university student who's only messing around."

Messing around.

That phrase perfectly described Sei-sama's surface appearance.

"Thanks for saying so. But what about you? This is a lot of effort you've gone to, especially for someone who doesn't socialize enough to leave an impression like mine."

"University's a place to go for learning. There's no need for socializing."

"Ah, it's coming back to me now. Katou Kei, you glared at me the first time we met."

"It wasn't a glare. It was just a surprised look. You've got a persecution complex."

"A persecution complex?"

Listening to them, apparently they had a memorable meeting.

They were probably in all the same classes at university, so it was only natural that they'd recognize each other, but this was apparently confirmation that they'd had a face-to-face meeting.

"After the university entrance ceremony, when we were gathered into separate classes, they took attendance. When a certain name was called out, two people responded."

"And Satou Sei-san was in the wrong, answering, "Here," when Katou Kei-san's name was called out, right?"

"Exactly."

Yumi could picture it. But even with such an intense encounter, to forget that girl's face, what was Sei-sama –

"At any rate, you can't know a person until you talk to them. Right, Satou-san?"

"So do you think you've gotten to know me?"

"A little bit. At the very least, you're deeper than I initially thought."

There, it's done. Katou Kei-san switched off the hair dryer and turned around.

"Well then, next it's Yumi-chan's turn."

Even though Yumi could have done it herself, Kei-san dried her hair for her. She ran her fingers from the tips of her hair through to the root. The warm air reached all the way through, gently coaxing. It felt really good and made Yumi drowsy.

She dozed off for a while, and Sachiko-sama came to her in a dream.

Sachiko-sama was crying. She was sitting, hunched over, in the corner of a large room. It was dimly lit. Yumi couldn't see the tears, but she was definitely crying.

It had been Sachiko-sama who had chosen Touko-chan over Yumi. So then, why did she have to cry?

Ahh, right. Because this was a dream.

She wanted Sachiko-sama to be crying because she was lonely after their split-up. That was probably Yumi's desire.

"When you're done with that, I'll call her house."

Sei-sama's voice brought Yumi back to reality.

"Don't worry, I'll explain everything."

She shook off the illusion of Sachiko-sama, and her heart swayed like a lullaby.

Neither Sei-sama nor Katou-san had asked for any sort of explanation.

They'd simply cared for her with all their might. They'd warmed her cold body, furnished her with dry clothes, and seen to it that she could get home to her family.

But that alone was enough.

It was what Yumi needed the most at that moment.

Part 4.

She was completely engulfed by the muggy atmosphere when she stepped outside.

The rain had stopped unnoticed, and a burst of sunlight had caused the temperature to shoot up.

The massive blanket of clouds that had shrouded the world in darkness had perhaps been blown somewhere else, as there was now only a thin lace curtain covering the sky.

In the end, Sei-sama had switched to her well-practiced honors-student voice and called Yumi's house.

All she said was that Yumi would be home late because her clothes had got wet in a terrible shower and they'd stopped at a friend's house close to school to dry off. She wasn't reading off lines she'd written down in a notebook, but she was able to make her explanation flow.

It wasn't a lie, but she stretched the truth a bit to give a different impression. From the way Sei-sama spoke, it sounded like there had been a sudden downpour of diagonally falling rain that caught them unawares, and that Sei-sama and Katou-san had both been soaked too.

Naturally, Yumi's mother took those words at face value and politely thanked Sei-sama, then when the phone was passed to Yumi, instructed her to, "Make sure you thank them before you come home." Incidentally, Yumi's mother was also a graduate of Lillian's and a fan of the former Rosa Gigantea, Sei-sama.

"It's like turning back time."

Sei-sama picked up the cloud ear mushroom, or black men's umbrella, and gave it a shake to clear away the drops of water.

Even though it was now actually dusk, it had been darker about two hours ago.

Such strange weather.

Yumi's sense of time was a bit off-kilter too, but not like Sei-sama's.

It had been two hours since she'd been struck by rain, idly watching the road that the black car had driven down. It felt like such a long time to have only been two hours, and such a short time to have already been two hours.

Had that really happened? Perhaps time was now going backwards, and it was about to happen next. The gap between when she entered and exited the house was too big, and it felt like she was in some kind of a dream.

But when she stepped outside, she realized something.

Like the rain from above, her tears had completely dried up too.

When she thought about Sachiko-sama it still made her chest hurt, but she didn't have the same despairing thoughts about wanting to disappear.

"Thank-you for everything."

"My pleasure. I'm happy that I could host such a cute visitor. I'm an only child, so I wanted to see what it was like to fuss over a younger sister."

Katou-san held Yumi's red folding umbrella out to her. At some point she'd washed away the mud from the inside, and apparently dried it too. The way she'd folded it properly indicated her meticulous nature.

"If you'd like, please come and visit again."

"You betcha."

Sei-sama responded first. But this received a frosty reception from Katou-san.

"That invitation wasn't for you, Satou-san. I was talking to Yumi-chan."

"Okay."

Yumi nodded, and her dry, light twin bundles of hair bounced up and down.

They turned down Katou-san's offer to walk them to the bus stop, and bid farewell to her at the main gate. Looking back at the jungle-like garden, it seemed far more elegant than earlier, perhaps due to time or the brightness of the surrounds.

She didn't know whether anyone was there or not, but Yumi turned towards that window and bowed. The lace curtain seemed to flutter, but that could have just been her imagination.

"Yumi-chan. Do you remember what I told you about Goronta?"

Sei-sama said, out of the blue. This was when they were walking beside each other down a small street lined with private houses, heading towards the main road.

"Goronta? Ah, yeah."

Goronta was the name used by Sei-sama's grade to refer to a stray cat that had its territory in the area surrounding Lillian's High School. Yumi's grade called the cat Lunch, while Rei-sama's grade called it Merry-san.

A long time ago, when it was still a kitten, Sei-sama had taken care of it after it had been attacked by crows. The blackish tabby cat had safely grown to adulthood, and was still occasionally seen in the courtyard and around the back of the school building.

"Right now, you're like that injured kitten, Yumi-chan."

So, what happened? Sei-sama cut short her words before reaching that conclusion.

However, Yumi didn't go searching for any further meaning. She simply said, "Yeah," and nodded. Yumi felt like she could vaguely understand what Sei-sama was trying to say.

When they reached the main road, they saw they were equidistant between two bus stops, so turned in the direction of traffic and kept walking.

"But still. With people, there's things you'll never know unless you talk to them. Especially."

"Huh?"

For a moment, Yumi thought Sei-sama was going to say something about Sachiko-sama, but she didn't.

"Katou Kei."

"Ahh – "

"Surprisingly, I think we could become good friends."

"Is that so."

As she said this, Yumi smiled, just a little. Sei-sama may not have noticed it herself, but it was possible that she had a soft spot for level-headed

meddlers. One of her closest friends, Sachiko-sama's onee-sama, Mizuno Youko-sama, was definitely that type. Rather looking after a junior, Sei-sama seemed to be more cut out for indulging one. While there was always the possibility it was planned, it looked more like a latent tendency.

"Oh."

Sei-sama turned around and called out. The bus to M station was bearing down on them from behind.

"Run, Yumi-chan."

Not waiting for clarification, Yumi started running too. No way she was going to let it get away.

Unlike trains, buses are affected by traffic conditions and other things. If she missed that one, it could be a long wait for the next one.

Barely making it to the bus stop ahead of the bus, they were breathing heavily as they climbed aboard.

"You're looking healthy."

The bus driver, about the same age as her father, smiled as he welcomed them aboard.

"Really?"

After showing her commuter pass, Yumi headed towards the back of the bus.

Healthy.

Ahh, right. Looking from the outside, all anyone would probably see would be a healthy high-school girl.

Her body still possessed the strength to run that far.

"Healthy, hey."

Sei-sama was laughing too, right beside her.

The bus wasn't so empty that they got a seat, but it wasn't overly crowded either.

There were about a dozen girls in high-school uniform on the bus, probably on their way home after club activities. They looked oddly at Yumi

as she got on two stops from school, and bowed when their eyes met. Yumi bowed back at them.

The high-school students probably had no idea that something had happened about two hours earlier, and shouldn't be able to guess anything based on her current appearance.

After passing a number of bus stops, they turned a corner. As the elbow of her arm holding the strap brushed against Yumi's, Sei-sama said:

"I won't escort you home."

"Okay."

She hadn't made a complete recovery just yet, but she was able to run to catch the bus. She was well enough to smile and exchange greetings with unfamiliar students.

Therefore, she'd be fine. She'd be able to get home by herself.

Like usual, she changed buses at the train station, got off at the usual stop near her house and then all she had to do was walk home.

Left, right, left, right.

If she continued walking like that, she'd soon be home.

Left, right, left, right.

In the same manner, tomorrow would surely come too.

Part 5.

It was just before 7 when she got home, and the preparations for dinner were already complete.

"Go change, and rinse your mouth. Dinner will be in five minutes."

Her mother didn't pry, probably thanks to Sei-sama's phone call. There were only a couple of questions related to Katou-san, since they'd imposed on her. Well, the Fukuzawas placed complete faith in their children, so there was no reason she would be doubted.

In the evening, as she was getting her books ready for tomorrow, Yumi was startled when she opened her school case. The textbooks that she'd used that day were in an appalling condition.

"Wah, wah, wah."

For a moment, she couldn't understand what had taken place in there. The topmost part of the books, near the bag's opening, looked like they'd been soaking up water.

She'd completely forgotten about it, but she'd thrown her bag to the ground along with her umbrella when she embraced Sei-sama. It had probably landed in a puddle, and water seeped in through the opening.

"... Ahhh."

Air had got between the pages of her math, modern Japanese, and English grammar textbooks, and from above they looked just like a mille-feuille.

Perhaps she could have done something to prevent it while they were still wet, but now that they were dry, the only way to get them back to their original condition would be to iron them. The thought of getting them wet a second time floated into her mind, but she dismissed it because it seemed like it would result in an even bigger mess.

The textbooks were used all through second-year, and Yumi was convinced that each time she saw those stains she'd be painfully reminded of the day's events. But there was nothing she could do about that.

The stained textbooks could never be changed back to the way they were before.

Yumi put the textbooks back into position within the bookends on her desk, and readied tomorrow's textbooks. Then, just for a little bit, she couldn't hold back the tears and so they flowed, although there was no clear reason for them.

At that moment, she couldn't hold on.

She couldn't force herself to keep up a cheery facade. Because right now, she was a wounded kitten. She needed her wounds licked, to be protected, and for her exhausted body and soul to be tended to.

She needed to rest, so that some day she would surely gain strength from this.

Leave thinking about tomorrow until tomorrow.

Yumi turned down the lights, crawled into bed, and bid farewell to the many and varied events of that day.

Classmates

Part 1.

The following morning, Yumi's lungs were straining when she woke up. It felt like she'd just got out of the pool.

Even her eyelids felt a bit swollen.

She had a dull pain near her temples. The after-effects of yesterday's tears.

When she was much younger, she used her whole body when crying, and she'd always feel like this the next day. She wasn't really much of a crybaby, but once she started crying it would get intense. Back then, since she couldn't put things into words that well, all she could do was resort to crying.

Yumi thought that perhaps she hadn't changed that much even now. About the only thing that was different was that she didn't have a fever.

"Get it together, Yumi."

She gave herself a pep-talk as she patted her cheeks. She wasn't forcing herself to be cheerful. She just didn't want to go to school with that miserable look on her face.

From her closet, she took the uniform out of its wrapping and changed into it. The uniform that she'd worn yesterday had been dried and brought back to its usual condition by Katou-san, but some stains had appeared later on so it had been taken to a dry-cleaners yesterday evening.

She tied her tie neatly and, since it was there, turned and smiled at the mirror. A bit awkward, but still okay. If she didn't say anything, no-one would know about her swollen eyelids.

She left the house with her red folding umbrella in hand.

Today's weather report had predicted a 20% chance of rain.

"Yumi-san, you're looking sharp."

"..."

Yumi looked up, there were eagle-eyed people everywhere, weren't there? It was Mami-san, from the newspaper club.

Even so, checking out her classmates' attire on the way in to the classroom. If she were following protocol, she should have started with "Gokigenyou."

"Yeah. A bit. I got caught in the rain yesterday and – "

Yumi mumbled a harmless answer, then, over Mami-san's shoulder, caught sight of a girl with braids some distance away and hurriedly stood up.

"Sorry, I've got to go."

Leaving Mami-san where she was, and bumping into a number of chairs in the process, Yumi leapt over to Yoshino-san.

"– Yoshino-san."

"..."

Yoshino-san, who had just entered the classroom, regarded Yumi with suspicion.

"Sorry about yesterday. You were worried about me, and it sort of looked like I turned you away."

This was about yesterday's events. Yoshino-san had tried to get her to go to the Rose Mansion, to meet Sachiko-sama, and Yumi had flatly rejected the offer.

"Hmm."

Yoshino-san seemed to sigh, then placed her bag on her desk and pointed her chin towards the hallway, indicating to Yumi that they should go outside.

Indeed, the classroom wasn't the kind of environment where they could have a quiet one-on-one chat. Having just apologized, Yumi's mind was, for now, completely at ease, but it looked like the same wasn't true for Yoshino-san. Preparing herself to listen to Yoshino-san's gripes, Yumi followed along behind her.

As they walked through the hallway and down the stairs, Yumi's eyes were fixed on Yoshino-san's braids as they swayed across her back.

Occasionally they'd bounce a bit, and depending on how Yumi's own heart was moving, they seemed to be either angry or dancing with delight.

Yoshino-san made her way to a courtyard in a different direction to the Rose Mansion, into the shade of a tall tree. She checked to make sure the area was deserted, then stopped and turned to face Yumi.

The pair were facing each other directly, and Yumi instantly tensed. Yoshino-san seemed to be silently scowling at her.

What was going to happen to her? Suddenly Yumi's heart started pounding. She didn't think she'd done anything bad enough that she'd get hit, but –

Just then.

"Yumi ... !"

Like she'd snapped under tension, Yoshino-san threw her arms around Yumi's neck and embraced her tightly.

"Wh, what's the matter?"

"I'm so glad. I thought I was no good. I thought we were done for."

"Huh?"

Yoshino-san had said 'we.' It must have seemed as though Yumi and Sachiko-sama's relationship wasn't the only one in trouble.

"But, we're okay right? When you said you were sorry, you meant you still wanted to be friends with me, right?"

"Right ... but why are you saying this?"

"Never mind. No matter what happens between you and Sachiko-sama, as long as we stay friends, it's fine. I won't keep badgering you to come to the Rose Mansion, so you don't have to ditch me along with the Yamayurikai."

"Yoshino-san – "

It seemed like Yoshino-san had been having troubles of her own yesterday while Yumi was going through her ordeal.

But what should she do about her current situation? Since Yoshino-san was short, it was completely different to when Sei-sama embraced her, it felt somehow fresh and new, and a little bit exciting.

"I'll still love you even if you're not a bouton."

Yoshino-san let go of Yumi's body, and took her hand.

"..."

Way back when, they'd said, "Let's be good friends forever," and shook hands. At the time, they'd wanted to foster a good relationship, like the Roses had, with the expectation that one day they would become Roses themselves.

But things were a bit different now.

Yumi too had started to think that even if she wasn't in the Yamayurikai, she still wanted to keep her friendship with Yoshino-san the way it was.

"Yeah, I like you too Yoshino-san."

Their relationship was changing. Evolving even.

Yumi felt nostalgic thinking about how they were when they'd made the "Let's be good friends forever," comment. As though the bonds between humans could be brought into existence just through words. What it really took was realizing just how much you needed someone, and how much they needed you.

"I'm sorry."

There were still so many ties between the two of them. Binding them and making them irreplaceable to each other.

"I'm so sorry, Yoshino-san."

Yumi's mind had been full of Sachiko-sama so she'd never noticed, but Yoshino-san must have been suffering. Yumi had never meant to damage her relationship with Yoshino-san.

"I was so worried. But it's okay. It was just me worrying about nothing."

Yoshino-san took a couple of steps along the path before turning around again.

"Anyway, you made the right decision not to come to the Rose Mansion yesterday. Sachiko-sama had left early."

"Yeah."

Yumi ran her fingers through the branches of a Scotch Broom shrub.

"What? How did you know? Did you meet her?"

"Yeah."

"And ... it went well?"

Yoshino asked, quite shyly. She'd obviously been concerned about it, since she said, "No matter what happens between you and Sachiko-sama."

"Nope."

Yumi smiled.

"Because I ran away."

Even though it was only the day after those painful events, she was able to speak smoothly. As though she was giving an outline of yesterday's TV drama.

"Why did you run away?"

Yoshino-san frowned as she asked the question.

"Because Touko-chan was there too."

When she heard Yumi's answer, Yoshino-san's hands clenched into fists and trembled.

"Touko!? That little – what was she doing there?"

"Don't mind that. I don't think Touko-chan's in the wrong. She just brought things to a head."

"But still."



Yoshino-san didn't seem satisfied by this. So Yumi explained further.

"If I trusted Sachiko-sama, then I'd be unconcerned even if she was with Touko-chan."

"Uh-huh. So it's a problem between you and Sachiko-sama. I think I kind of understand."

Yoshino-san folded her arms across her chest and grunted, "Hmmm." Even though she said she kind-of understood, she seemed to get it at a deep level.

Fundamentally, human relationships were one-on-one, so assuming that Sachiko-sama had cast aside Yumi and was gravitating towards Touko-chan, then that was Sachiko-sama's decision and unrelated to Touko-chan.

People's feelings can change. It wasn't like Sachiko-sama was Yumi's property, she was her own person with her own personality.

Therefore, it was unthinkable that their relationship was being torn apart by Touko-chan.

"So, what happens next, Yumi-san?"

"I'm not sure what I'll do."

In her mind, Yumi knew that she should go to the Rose Mansion, meet Sachiko-sama and settle things. But it was hard to face up to Sachiko-sama after her shameful behavior yesterday.

"It's lonely in the Rose Mansion at lunchtime without you. What do you do for lunch?"

"I eat in the classroom."

But that was a complicated matter too.

Since the boutons were supposed to be busy, it would be odd for her to eat in the classroom day after day. There were people that would notice that kind of thing too. Yamaguchi Mami-san and Takeshima Tsutako-san had been glancing in her direction. Quite recently.

"Maybe I should do what Shimako-san did, and eat outside in an out-of-the-way place."

"During the rainy season?"

Yoshino made the classic catching-raindrops-on-the-palm-of-her-hand pose. It hadn't rained so far today, but it wouldn't be unusual for it to start any time.

"I could take my umbrella when it rains."

"Yumi-san, do you have a bread roll today?"

"Nope."

"That's quite a feat, to hold an umbrella with one hand and use your chopsticks with the other."

"I guess so."

Yumi ran a few simulations in her head, and it did look quite complicated.

"Either way, you don't look too concerned by it."

And just how should she have looked? Yoshino-san had sounded dejected when she muttered this last comment.

Part 2.

Lunchtime soon arrived.

"Yumi-san. In the Rose Mansion – "

When their fourth period class finished, Yoshino-san approached Yumi, lunchbox in hand.

"I guess you're not coming, after all."

She'd derived the answer upon seeing Yumi's expression.

"Sorry."

"No, I was just checking. Still."

Yoshino-san didn't withdraw immediately, instead she whispered:

"Sachiko-sama's absent today, so she won't be at the Rose Mansion ... okay?"

"Absent ... Huh?"

Yumi hadn't known that.

The likelihood of accidentally running into someone from a different class in the vast campus wasn't that big. And for people in different grades, the probability was even lower still.

"Rei-chan told me. During a break, she went to Sachiko-sama's classroom on an errand. That's how."

How she came to know about Sachiko-sama's absence.

"I wonder why."

"Rei-chan said she didn't know."

Recently, Sachiko-sama had frequently been absent or had left to go home early. Perhaps there was something wrong with her health. No, when they'd met yesterday, she hadn't seemed to be in fantastic health, but she didn't look like she was ill either.

"What will you do?"

Yoshino-san asked, once more. Will you go to the Rose Mansion, or not?

"I decided not to go."

"That's true."

Yoshino-san nodded, keeping her promise not to badger Yumi to come to the Rose Mansion.

Going to the Rose Mansion because Sachiko-sama wouldn't be there wasn't something that Yumi could bring herself to do. It would be like she was an adulterous wife's lover, going to visit while the husband was away. That sort of sneaking around was deplorable.

If she was going to go to the Rose Mansion, it was better to do so when Sachiko-sama was there.

If she couldn't walk in there with her head held high and her chest out, it was better not to go at all.

After Yoshino-san had exited the classroom, three classmates took her place, surrounding Yumi.

"Yumi-san, if you'd like, why don't you accompany us to Milk Hall?"

"Huh?"

Hearing this sudden proposal, a jolt of tension ran through her.

"Please, if you're not going to the Rose Mansion."

"We were just thinking we'd like to get to know you better, Yumi-san."

The common trait among the three of them may well have been that their second-year of high-school was the first time they'd been in the same class as Yumi. They'd been in the same class for about two months now, but Yumi hadn't really talked to them all that much.

"What do you say? Let's go together. Misa-san went ahead to reserve five seats for us."

Misa-san was the name of another classmate that Yumi had had very little contact with.

"Well, since you've gone to all that trouble."

It would be a shame to waste those seats, so Yumi left the classroom with the girls who had invited her. Milk Hall was a cafeteria and dining hall, so it could also be used by students who brought their lunch.

As they walked through the halls, they talked about their impressions of their fourth period class, magazine reports on natural cosmetics targeted at teens, and who they liked from the latest pop bands.

The Yamayurikai wasn't mentioned at all. Perhaps sensing the true cause, the question "Why aren't you going to the Rose Mansion?" never came up.

"Did you see that new sunscreen lotion ad? I heard the model in the swimsuit's the same age as us."

The topic of conversation soon changed. It was bewildering, like flipping pages in a magazine.

Perhaps this was how she would have spent her days if she hadn't become Sachiko-sama's petit soeur. That thought floated into Yumi's mind as she listened to the conversation. With that assumption, the way she drifted along was pleasant enough.

"Then Miitan started sulking, and it turned into such a drama."

"Ah, Miitan is Satoe-san's cat."

"She's a Persian-Japanese mix. Satoe-san showed us a picture a while ago, and she's sooo cute."

This was probably a regular topic of conversation, so the explanation wasn't necessary between the friends. Her kind classmates had provided this commentary for her sake. This consideration made Yumi happy. But on the other hand, it was also something she felt she had to apologize for.

Because she'd caused the conversation to pause momentarily.

As a guest, she'd feel more at ease if the conversation progressed at its usual break-neck pace. But she couldn't say that. There was the question of whether it would be interpreted correctly.

Therefore she obediently chimed-in to the conversation.

"Next time you bring one, could you show me a picture of Mii-chan too?"

"Yumi-san. It's not Mii-chan, it's Miitan."

"Ah, oh no. My apologies."

Yumi smiled as she walked down the corridor. It seemed unbelievable even to herself, but she was indeed smiling.

She didn't know what was so amusing.

But the silly chatter made Yumi smile. She wasn't smiling in her heart, it was only on the surface of her face.

Because that was more comfortable.

Perhaps it would stick, and bring comfort to her heart.

After they'd left the school building, when Milk Hall came into view, she caught sight of someone she knew walking along the path in the opposite direction.

The girl was headed her way, chatting to what looked like a couple of her classmates. Trademark vertical curls on both sides of her head. Probably heading back to her classroom after buying something from Milk Hall. A strawberry milk carton held in her hand.

As they reached point-blank range, Yumi's heart was engulfed in a storm of emotions, but she kept a calm facade, smiling and responding to her classmates' conversation appropriately.

This was to convey that Yumi was unconcerned. That when she looked at Touko-chan's face, she could do so serenely.

It was, ultimately, a display.

This matter didn't concern Touko-chan, it was between herself and Sachiko-sama. Even though Yumi accepted this, that wasn't all there was to it. Because when the person who started it all was right in front of her, she couldn't help but think bad thoughts about her.

"Despicable."

As they crossed paths, Touko-chan said this loud enough that Yumi's group could hear.

Even though she should have ignored it, Yumi turned around. To question why she felt that she had to say this. The rebuttal she wanted to say was, "You're the one stealing my onee-sama."

When she turned around, Touko-chan was standing right there, waiting for her.

"I misjudged you, Yumi-sama."

Yumi had no idea why Touko-chan was acting so boldly. The strength of her gaze made Yumi want to turn away, but she managed to hold on, just. If she looked away, she'd have lost. She wasn't exactly sure what contest they were having, but, at the very least, she recognized the scornful words that had been directed at her.

"You have no right to say something like that."

Yumi wasn't used to arguing. Consequently, those were the only words that she could squeeze out.

"Even if I don't have the right, I'll say what I want to say."

One of Touko-chan's companions said, "Hold on now," grabbed her arm and started to pull Touko-chan away. A first-year student was picking a fight with one of her seniors, so the correct course of action for her friends was to put a stop to it.

"Let's go, Yumi-san."

After there was some distance between them, thanks to Touko-chan's friend dragging her away, Yumi's classmates decided it was best to take her to Milk Hall. It was like they were two dogs, growling at each other, and being separated by their owners.

"If you've got some objection, it's better to speak out. If there's something you want to say, go ahead and say it."

Touko-chan was still barking.

"How can you look away from something so serious and laugh like a ditz?"

"D ... ditz?"

Hearing these unexpected words sapped Yumi of her strength. Even if Touko-chan was looking to stir up trouble, saying 'ditz' was being too cruel.

"Just as I thought, Yumi-sama's not suitable for Sachiko-sama."

In the end, Touko-chan's mouth was muzzled by her classmates, and they marched her back to the high-school building.

"The nerve of that kid."

It looked like even Yumi's classmates had been affected by Touko-chan's bile.

"Yumi-san, are you okay?"

"Yeah ... I'm fine."

Despite what she said, the truth was that she wasn't fine.

Ditz though she may be, Touko-chan's words had pierced her heart and remained lodged in there even after she'd finished eating her lunch.

Part 3.

"So is the Red Rose Revolution happening, or not?"

"What's that?"

After school, as Yumi was making her way out, Yamaguchi Mami-san pulled her back into the classroom, saying, "Five minutes, please." There were still a lot of their classmates around as Yumi was taken to the back of the classroom, and made to sit down in a seat near the window.

"The word is, you and Miss Matsudaira Touko came to blows today at lunchtime."

"That's a bit of an exaggeration."

Yumi laughed. Had she been testing to see who would believe this rumor? Mami-san was the petit soeur of the newspaper club's president, and the current chief editor of the Lillian Kawaraban, the school's newspaper.

Spinning a mechanical pencil around her fingertips, Mami-san smiled.

"Yeah. I heard the other side of the story from a couple of our classmates, so I know it wasn't anything more than words. However – "

"However?"

"The rumor's spreading fast. It took about two hours to reach me, and by that time it had been embellished to the point where Rosa Chinensis en bouton received an open-handed slap from a younger student."

"..."

So it took two hours for Mami-san to catch hold of the rumor. Which meant her classmates hadn't gone directly to the newspaper club to spill the gossip.

The path to Milk Hall was at peak capacity during lunch break, so it may have been one of the students coming and going.

Those watching at a distance may have passed the word around, each adding their own speculation, and after two hours it had reached a 'truth' unknown to the people actually involved.

"There was a note going around in class that said the same thing, so it looks like the embellishment has stuck."

"Is that so?"

Which would account for the speed with which the rumor spread, given that it had really only been a short time since lunch. On top of that, it was a juicy bit of gossip.

But even so, a slap. What an incredible rumor.

"Another piece of gossip I heard from a different source said that Matsudaira Touko had stolen Yumi-san's rosary."

"Uhh..."

Yumi thought there may have been a bit of truth to that rumor. Last year's "Lillian Kawaraban" had printed articles solely like those from a weekly gossip mag, so there was a bit of an immunity. But how much of these rumors would everyone believe?

"On top of that ... right, right. I've heard others like Sachiko-sama's two-timing, that kind of thing."

"Huh."

Hearing the phrase 'two-timing,' Yumi momentarily stiffened. Warning, warning, these were simply examples. She was talking to the extremely perceptive Mami-san. The newspaper club's star reporter. She had to make sure she wasn't tricked by the casual tone of their conversation into letting something slip out of her mouth.

Whether Mami-san noticed that tremor or not, she peered intently at Yumi's face.

"You'd better be careful. The general public is scary."

"S ... scary?"

Yumi thought that she was probably just saying this for dramatic effect. Although it may not have been a good example, Mami-san was probably the type of person who was good at telling ghost stories.

"Would you like me to lend a hand?"

This was the real question, and while she didn't say it, Mami-san's eyes blazed brightly.

"A hand?"

"An exclusive interview with Fukuzawa Yumi, printed in the Lillian Kawaraban."

"So that's what this is about?"

"That's what this is about."

If the person involved told the full story, all the useless embellishments would probably disappear, once and for all.

Gossip spread because of people's desire to know what happened, so if the truth was exposed in broad daylight, then the desire would be satisfied and it would recede from people's minds, like an ebbing tide.

"Thank-you, but I'll pass."

Yumi definitively rejected the offer to "lend a hand." Mami-san responded with a cocked eyebrow and a question:

"You don't have faith in what I'd write?"

"That's not it. This time around, I want to handle it myself, one way or the other."

"Will you be able to, one way or the other?"

"Even if I can't, it's okay. People will lose interest in the rumor sooner or later. You know what they say, "Gossip only lasts one season.***"

"And summer vacation is coming soon, right?"

"Exactly."

Yumi smiled too. She didn't know if she'd be able to handle this herself, but she felt it was something she had to do.

Her remaining classmates left the classrooms in ones and twos, saying, "Gokigenyou," as they went.

Yoshino-san had left for club activities a long time ago.

Inadvertently, she thought of the Rose Mansion. At that moment, it was probably just Shimako-san and Noriko-chan sitting around the large table on the second floor, silently doing paperwork.

The thought, "I want to go and help," floated through her mind, and Yumi shook her head violently, to throw it off. She'd already made her decision not to go. She couldn't cling on to this lingering affection.

"If people only know a part of the story, they'll just fill in the part they don't know themselves."

Mami-san remained seated, and stretched upwards with both hands. Five minutes had already elapsed, but Yumi was in no hurry to go home, so she stayed chatting.

"For instance, take a look at Yumi-san from my point of view."

Returning her gaze, Mami-san started scribbling something in her report pad.

"A fight with Matsudaira Touko. Recently, for some reason, she's been avoiding the Rose Mansion. And yesterday, in front of the school gate, she was absolutely drenched."

"—"

As expected, she'd caught wind of yesterday's events. And since she'd stated it so confidently, it meant she wasn't treating it as a rumor, so she must have got her hands on some firm evidence.

"That's only three data points. But on the other hand, those three are plenty stimulating. Enough to get the imagination firing."

'Quarrel,' 'Rose Mansion,' 'Drenched.' Mami-san drew curves between the three scrawled phrases, making a rounded triangle.

"The point is, the subject of all three is the same. I'm free to imagine how they're all linked together. In truth, it could be a wavy line, or it could be a dotted line. Or perhaps they're completely unrelated."

"Unrelated?"

"There's no connection between them, they're just interesting things happening at roughly the same time. Well, normally you'd call that a coincidence."

"Yeah, right."

Yumi snorted.

The argument with Touko-chan, the circumstances around her not going to the Rose Mansion, and getting drenched in front of the school gate

despite having an umbrella – as if they would all be just a coincidence. Was that really something Mami-san would think?

"But, see, I don't know the truth about this. The only one that does know is you, Yumi-san."

Ahh, was that it? There may have been but one truth, but only the person involved could discern it. People had to rely on their imagination to provide the missing part.

"Then on top of that, add in Rosa Chiensis' absence."

Indeed. While Yumi thought that it was completely unrelated to her, the fact of Rosa Chinensis' absence had been added in like it was all one scene of a movie.

"Why is she absent?"

Mami-san asked.

"I don't know."

Yumi answered, not looking away.

"You're her petit soeur, right?"

"There's things even petit soeurs don't know. You said it yourself, just before, right? For me, the reason for my onee-sama's absence is one of those 'parts I don't know.'"

"Hmm, you've got me there. Alright then, a personal question. What happened to your rosary, Yumi-san?"

"My rosary?"

"When we were getting changed, it wasn't hanging around your neck."

Sharp eye. Which meant Yumi shouldn't let her guard down, even in the changing rooms.

"No comment."

Yumi stood up from her seat, running away from the question. Mami-san remained seated, looked up at Yumi and smiled.

"Smart move. Better to stay silent than to open your mouth and say something poorly."

"You're going to make that into an article?"

"I can't just yet. But when I do, I'll let you see the final draft before it's printed."

"Okay."

That was the type of person that Mami-san was. Which was why Yumi could chat with her like this. She wouldn't just print their conversation in the Lillian Kawaraban. But having said that, Mami-san could be quite persuasive, so it was better not to blurt out something carelessly.

After returning to her own desk and picking up her school bag, Yumi heard Mami-san mumbling behind her, as if talking to herself.

"It's just something I want to know. What's going on with Yumi-san this time around?"

"You can tell that something's going on?"

Yumi turned around and asked.

"I can. But I don't know what."

Mami-san scribbled letters and diagrams on her report pad. All this was focused on the unknown parts, Yumi herself remained largely unchanged.

However.

During her conversation with Mami-san, there had definitely been moments when it felt like some kind of hint was coming into view, and then going back into hiding.

Milk Tea, Oolong Tea

Part 1.

"Welcome."

A refined, white-haired elderly woman opened the wooden door and invited Yumi in.

"I was having an afternoon nap, when I got the feeling that a visitor would be coming soon. So I prepared some tea and waited. Hehehe, I was right on the money. I'm so glad."

"Huh?"

She took a bewildered Yumi by the hand and ushered her into the garden.

Of course, since she was standing in front of that door, Yumi had been intending to go inside. The moment she'd knocked on the door it had opened from the other side, and before she had a chance to state the reason for her visit she'd been dragged inside, so she was mildly flustered.

It was like a fairytale, where she'd just been caught by the wicked witch.

"Ah, umm – "

She had said, "A visitor." Yumi was getting a bit anxious, wondering if she'd been mistaken for someone else, when the old lady said:

"I know. You're Kei-san's friend's friend."

She tapped her index finger against her nose.

"Kei-san's friend's friend ... "

In that case, there was no mistake. Yumi had come here because of the debt she owed to Katou-san from that rainy day.

It was Saturday, and the sun's rays were shining between the clouds for the first time in a while.

The reason Yumi had come all the way to Kei-san's house, when Kei-san went to Lillian's University, was because she knew from personal experience the difficulty of finding someone on campus.

Since Yumi had made the fundamental mistake of failing to get Kei-san's phone number when she had the chance, she had no way to get in touch and organize somewhere to meet.

"Kei-san's not in right now. So why don't you come and have a chat with me in the main building."

The elderly lady opened the glass sliding door that faced the garden and beckoned Yumi inside. While Yumi was still wondering what she should do, the old woman rushed inside, saying, "Oh no, the water's boiling over," and Yumi was drawn in behind her. Using the sliding door made Yumi think of entering through a window, which took her back to her childhood.

"... Pardon my intrusion."

The room was a living room, with tatami mats on the floor.

Black posts in white mortar walls. In this austere Japanese style room there was a Western table, and lace curtains hung from the wood-framed windows. By the window, there was an old looking rocking chair, and a floral patterned cushion gently swayed.

"The kettle's boiled over, and it looks like we just avoided an accident with the gas."

It wasn't a laughing matter, but the elderly lady seemed to be smiling with delight as she entered the living room. The light brown floral apron matched well with her white hair, and although it may be rude to say this about someone much older, she looked really cute.

"Have a seat in any old chair."

"Okay."

So Yumi sat down in the nearest chair. Strictly speaking, one of the chairs would be the head of the table, but since the room was a blend of Japanese and Western styles, Yumi couldn't determine which was which.

"Would milk tea be okay?"

"Umm, please don't go out of your way on account of me."

Yumi was fairly certain that this was the landlady, but she left a quite different impression compared to the first visit.

"I apologize for the other day. I'm not at my best when it's rainy."

"Uh, okay. Um, it was no problem."

It seemed that, once again, her thoughts had been read by someone else. Yumi was getting flustered, and the elderly lady smiled and placed a teacup in front of her.

"Thank-you."

As Yumi said this, she suddenly remembered, and diverted the hand that had been reaching out for the teacup towards her bag. She'd forgotten something vital.

"The other day, I suddenly imposed on you – "

Putting on a meek expression, Yumi held out a prettily wrapped box that was about the size of a sewing kit.

"Oh my."

"My mother sends her thanks."

"How courteous. But, I didn't do anything. You should be giving those to Kei-san instead."

"No, I have another one for Katou-san."

Yumi pressed the box forwards, offering them to the elderly woman, who faithfully accepted them with a, "Well, in that case," and opened the wrapping.

"How delightful. Maple Parlor baked cookies. These will go well with milk tea. If you'll just wait a minute, we can eat these together."

She took two of the individually wrapped cookies and placed them on Yumi's saucer. Chocolate and plain. They were both Yumi's favorite.

"May I inquire as to your name?"

"Ah, it's Yumi. I'm Fukuzawa Yumi."

"My, what a wonderful coincidence."

The old lady clapped her hands together, her eyes sparkling.

"I'm a Yumi too. But with 'ko' at the end."

The landlady said her name was Ikegami Yumiko, and that she was a graduate of Lillian's. And just like that, they established a good rapport, and

started calling each other, "Yumi-san," and "Yumiko-san." If they were strictly following tradition, then it should have been "Yumiko-sama," but the person in question said that she preferred "Yumiko-san."

"You seem to come from a good family, Yumi-san."

Yumiko-san remarked, as she unwrapped a cookie.

"Ah, not at all. I come from a long line of commoners."

Yumi hastily shook her head. It wasn't just humility, the Fukuzawa lineage was exceedingly ordinary.

"I wasn't talking about wealth or prestige or anything like that. What I meant was you have conscientious parents who have raised a well-mannered daughter."

"Oh ... is that so?"

Yumi wasn't often praised like that, so she didn't quite know how to react. Part of the reason was that Lillian's Girls Academy was a gathering spot for well-trained daughters of high class families, and students of Yumi's caliber were run-of-the-mill, so weren't necessarily valued as highly. As for her parents, well it wasn't that they weren't conscientious, but they weren't particularly strict either – they were just normal parents.

"Perhaps people are just unable to see the true value of what they possess."

"Hmmm ... "

What did she mean by 'the true value of what she possessed?' Before Yumi started to grapple with the question itself, first she posed it as a reading comprehension problem. "In 100 words, explain the meaning of the phrase the elderly lady in front of you just said." But even when put like that, she couldn't derive the correct answer.

While Yumi was thinking about this, Yumiko-san chuckled.

"May I say something about my impression of you, Yumi-san?"

"Yes?"

"You're incredibly earnest. In your student handbook, you've probably got approval from your homeroom teacher for your visit here, right?"

"_"

Bingo. But rather than earnestness, that was simply cowardice.

When she'd visited the other day, it hadn't been planned, and it was done primarily to get out of the rain, so she hadn't sought permission. But with a planned visit, she would have felt nervous if she hadn't got permission. Scared that someone would challenge her.

Because it was completely different to stopping at the train station's book store. She was visiting someone's house, carrying a box of cookies.

"You must be popular with the older students."

"I'm not so sure."

"Then, the younger students?"

"No, not really."

When Yumi heard 'younger students,' she pictured Touko-chan's face.

"Really?"

Yumi-san smiled as she sipped her tea.

"You have an onee-sama?"

"Onee-sama ... "

"Oh, perhaps that's something I shouldn't ask about."

Yumiko-san asked, her expression that of a child who had done something wrong, when she saw Yumi struggling for words.

"It's nothing like that. Currently, you could say we're quarreling, there's been a bit of a misunderstanding – "

Yumi hid that they were on the brink of collapse. It wasn't something she wanted to talk about with other people, and just putting it into words would likely bring tears along too.

Sometimes it's helpful to talk about problems with someone else, but there's also things that are made even tougher by putting them into words.

If she were to utter the words, "Some day I may no longer be Sachiko-sama's petit soeur," then it felt like that day would come sooner.

"Do you like your onee-sama?"

Yumiko-san asked, out of the blue.

"Yes."

Despite the sudden question, Yumi answered without stopping to think. Setting aside all the extraneous questions, like, "What's Sachiko-sama thinking?" or, "What about Touko-chan?" and thinking purely about Sachiko-sama, Yumi still liked her.

"Then in that case, it'll all be fine."

"Huh?"



"As long as you like your onee-sama, things between you will return to normal. After all, she was somebody that you chose."

"I chose her?"

Not "was chosen by her", but "chose her?"

"Right. She was somebody that you chose. She's not going to be so foolish as to let go of you."

"I think you're really overestimating me."

Yumi smiled, shrugging her shoulders. But Yumiko-san had a serious expression, like a prophet, as she said:

"Have some more confidence. There's hardly anyone who could grow to hate you, Yumi-san."

"That's not true."

Touko-chan had said, "Despicable," and, "I misjudged you." She hadn't been acting. That had been her true face.

"When you're told something harsh, even by someone who likes you, it can come as a bit of a shock."

Yumiko-san said, when Yumi accidentally let her complaint slip out.

"Perhaps that girl's jealous of you."

"Jealous?"

Such incredible positive thinking. It was only because she didn't know Touko-chan's character that she could say something like that.

"There's a chemistry to human relationships, and people who don't hit it off together draw away from each other. Spontaneously."

"Really?"

"When you care for someone, there are times when you have to speak strongly to them. But it can be difficult to see that – "

Yumiko-san had a faraway look in her eyes as she spoke. Like the video's pause button had been pressed, her finger remained lightly touching the rim of her teacup, without even a slight tremor.

"Yu-Yumiko-san?"

Growing uneasy, Yumi called out, and Yumiko-san snapped out of it, like someone coming out of hypnosis.

"Ah, I'm sorry. Some very old emotions were brought back, just now."

"I was a bit surprised."

Yumi clutched her chest. She'd half suspected that it had been a heart-attack, or a stroke, or something like that. After all, Yumiko-san was quite elderly.

"They're memories of when I wore the same uniform as you, Yumi-san. Really, we've come such a long way since then."

We.

Yumiko-san was probably speaking of herself and someone else.

"... I miss her."

Yumiko-san mumbled drowsily as she looked out the window.

Part 2.

"That's unusual. Yumiko-san doesn't usually invite people in to her living room and then doze off."

Katou-san said in amazement, when she poked her head in through the window on her arrival home.

Was it unusual that Yumiko-san invited people in, or that she dozed off in front of them? Yumi couldn't quite decide which was intended, but there wasn't any real need to investigate further, so she simply greeted Katou-san with, "Gokigenyou." Quietly, so she didn't wake Yumiko-san.

"I think she's taken a shine to you, Yumi-san. Maybe a bit envious. Despite her misanthropy."

"Misanthropy? Yumiko-san?"

Hearing Katou-san's words, Yumi instinctively laughed. Sure, when Yumi had first come, she'd drawn the curtain and hadn't come out to greet them, but she explained that that was because she wasn't at her best when it rained – . However, Katou-san was being serious.

"In truth, she can be quite difficult."

"Even to you?"

"Not so much to me. I can rent here at a reasonable price because she likes me."

While Yumiko-san slept soundly in her rocking chair, Katou-san found a lap blanket somewhere and draped it over her. Yumiko-san said, "Mmm," and moved slightly, but soon returned to the land of sleep.

Katou-san suggested they go somewhere else, and so they left Yumiko-san.

"There was a really strict interview when I applied to rent here."

Arriving back at her place, Katou-san took a can of oolong tea from the refrigerator and offered it to Yumi.

"With Yumiko-san?"

" – and a relative."

"Relative?"

Despite having milk tea with Yumiko-san, Yumi said, "Thank-you," and opened the can's pull top. In this humid season her thirst was insatiable, and oolong tea was delicious.

"See, she doesn't have any children. Her relatives live far away, and were worried about her living alone, so she decided to take in a boarder. She's not renting the room out for the income. So rather than a tenant, I'm more of a companion, caregiver, and aide."

That's just like Katou-san.

"That's why I got an incredible deal, especially for a one bedroom apartment in the metro area."

There had been a lot of applicants, because it was such an incredible deal, so she wouldn't have been staying there if she hadn't passed the interview and agreed to the strict conditions.

"Yumi-chan, if you're going to Lillian's University, I could put in a recommendation for you to live here after me."

"Huh."

"It's a joke. You seem to get along well with your family, so you probably won't leave home."

Katou-san smiled. Even though she said it was a joke, her deadpan delivery was amazing.

"So, what brings you here today?"

"Ah."

It was at this point that Yumi suddenly remembered, and handed over the same box of cookies that she'd earlier given to Yumiko-san.

"Oh, I didn't invite you back to my place because I was expecting a reward."

"But you were a huge help."

Of course there was the physical aspect of drying Yumi's uniform, but she was also grateful for the time given to her by Katou-san, which allowed her frozen heart to thaw.

"Plus these."

Yumi held out more items, wrapped in plastic, that her mother had bought at the same time she bought the sweets. There was an undershirt and a pair of boyshorts, from a 100-yen shop. They weren't exactly the same as the ones Yumi had taken, but the important part was the 100-yen pricetag.

"For the next time you have a friend that's in need."

"How conscientious ... "

Katou-san smirked as she went ahead and took the items, put the underwear in a drawer and set the sweets on the traditional Japanese desk by the window.

Next to it was a small picture frame.

Yumi hadn't noticed it when she was here the other day. The snapshot inside was faded from the sun and looked quite old. There was a young couple with a child who looked about four. It looked like an amusement park in the background, and it seemed to be a happy photo.

Noticing Yumi's gaze, Katou-san said:

"It's instead of an altar."

"An altar ... "

"My parents and me. Of the three, two of us are still alive, but I thought a photograph with all of us together would be less lonely. So I've got a family photo. I think my mother would be pleased by the photograph with me and dad too."

"Your mother's – "

Ooh, what to do? Yumi was suddenly beset by panic. Until now, she hadn't really considered that there were people around her age whose mother had passed away. She didn't know what she should say to those people, but then she wondered what would happen if her own mother was to die tomorrow, and was thrust into darkness by despairing thoughts.

No, she had to set aside her own emotions for now. Just now, she'd been innocently saying things like, "My mother bought these for you," and, "Mom sends her regards too." How did Katou-san feel, hearing these things?

"Oh, I'm sorry. Things turned serious there."

Katou-san spoke in an upbeat manner, in direct contradiction to her words.

"It happened fifteen years ago, so you don't have to worry about it."

"Fifteen years ... "

Which meant that her mother had died not long after that photo was taken.

"So, your father must have been pretty lonely when you moved out then?"

It was a casual comment, but a needless one.

"Well, about that. Recently, a new mother arrived."

"Huh?"

Did she mean that her father remarried?

What to do? Yumi hadn't meant to pry into her new acquaintance's family circumstances, yet she found herself plunging headfirst into them.

"Um ..."

Should she say, "Congratulations?" That felt a bit strange. From the daughter's point of view, it didn't seem like it would necessarily be a good thing either. – While Yumi was puzzling over this, Katou-san continued.

"And me, I'm repeating first-year."

"Huh?"

The hits kept coming, this time from a different direction to the one Yumi was guarding against.

"Repeating ... "

In other words, while she was in the same grade as Sei-sama, who had started university this year, she was a year older.

"I didn't have a gap year, or anything like that, I entered Lillian's last year, and this is my second go at first-year. In summer last year, my father collapsed and was taken to hospital unconscious. See, he's an only child, and I'm his only family. Because of that, I couldn't concentrate on my studies, so I took a leave of absence. Even when he was over the worst of it, it took a

long time until he was able to walk again. He's still going to rehab because there's a little bit of paralysis remaining even now."

"..."

Yumi had no idea how to respond to any of this.

It felt like she was gradually being dragged into the depths, with no idea where this story was going.

"But it wasn't all bad. As a result of his illness, he reconnected with an old lover from ten years ago, and they had a civil ceremony when he left hospital. I was a bit surprised, because I'd never even heard of her until recently, but she's a really nice lady. She's almost been too good to him. She takes care of him, so I could go back to university ... It's a strange bit of luck. Because I waited a year, this place became available, so I could move out of home."

The proverb **"Old Man Sai's Horse,"** that Yumi had been taught in Classical Literature leapt out of the textbook and galloped around her head.

Life wasn't all bad, so there was no call for pessimism. But neither do the good times continue forever, so you can't always be having fun.

Why had Katou-san told Yumi this story? Was she trying to cheer her up?

"I just wanted to tell you this."

She wanted to talk to someone about her situation. That's what Katou-san said. To talk about her father's sickness and about her step-mother. Apparently it had been a while since she'd been able to talk to someone.

When she was in the middle of the maelstrom, there were only her emotions, and it was hard to calmly put the situation into words. There was too much to think about, nothing she wanted to say, and no-one to listen anyway. But then one day she ran out of strength, and wanted to talk to someone about her situation. For Katou-san, it just happened to be Yumi that she talked to.

"I'm sorry that you got soaked Yumi-chan, but I'm glad it rained that day."

"Because it meant you got to know Sei-sama?"

"Sei-sama ... ? Ah, Satou-san, right."

Katou-san laughed and ran a hand through her hair.

"It's interesting, that's for sure. Those Lillian traditions. Occasionally, one of the other girls will call her Rosa Gi ... something."

"Rosa Gigantea."

"Right. Rosa Gigantea! Is that like a lifelong position?"

"At the moment, one of my friends has succeeded her as Rosa Gigantea."

"And you?"

"I'm Rosa Chinensis en bouton ... at least for now."

"For now, huh."

Katou-san must have witnessed the scene of Sachiko-sama and Touko-chan driving off in a black car. She'd also probably heard Yumi crying out, "Onee-sama." So she could probably guess, more or less, why Yumi had been soaked like a drowned rat.

Even so, she didn't say anything. While she had opened up about herself, she didn't try to coerce Yumi into doing the same.

Yumi didn't say anything, enjoying the silence. In silence, they both drank their oolong tea.

At that point.

"Quite a suspicious atmosphere between the two of you."

An intruder appeared, sticking a boot into their quiet contemplation.

"Su-suspicious?"

Katou-san and Yumi looked at each other.

"Suspicious, suspicious. Katou-san, hands off my teddy bear."

The boot was just a figure of speech, for Sei-sama had properly removed her sandals before entering the house.

"Yumi-chan's your teddy bear?"

"Yep. She's so soft and cuddly when you hug her tight. On top of that, she's nice and warm. It feels so good that before long I start to feel sleepy."

Sei-sama sat behind Yumi and hugged her like she was trying to eat her head.

"Ah, it's been a while. Yumi-chan, wouldn't you rather be my pet?"

Squeeze, squeeze. As Sei-sama prodded her arms, Yumi drowsily said: "I wouldn't."

If Sei-sama protected her, then she'd undoubtedly find a comfy, sleepy sort of peace of mind, but that wasn't right. While it was nice to be indulged and spoiled once in a while, if that happened all the time it felt like she'd lose the ability to think, worry, and choose for herself.

So, painful as it may be, the times she needed Sei-sama was when she had no-one else to turn to.

Like the joker in a game of cards. A superhero who protects the world.

"Hearing that, I'm relieved."

Sei-sama released Yumi, then laughed as she said:

"It takes a lot of energy to keep up with you, Yumi-chan."

Apparently it was a test of stamina, even for a superhero.

Welcome

Part 1.

Her blue umbrella returned home.

Not returned, but returned home. Like it had the homing instincts of a lost dog, it returned home to Yumi's hand.

This happened after school on Monday.

When she was leaving afternoon homeroom, as though she had just remembered, Yumi's homeroom teacher informed her:

"Ah, Fukuzawa-san. Aota-sensei from middle school wanted to have a word with you, so stop by the staff room after you've finished cleaning duty."

"Aota-sensei?"

He had been her homeroom teacher during the first year of middle school. They hadn't really had much contact since Yumi moved to high-school, since they were in separate buildings and he didn't teach any of her classes.

"Do you know what it's about?"

"He didn't say. But I don't think it's anything to worry about."

"Huh?"

"Aota-sensei was smiling when he asked."

"Ahh, smiling ..."

Good or bad. Either way, Yumi didn't even have a rough idea of what it could be about. If it had been her third-year homeroom teacher, then she could have started to guess.

For example:

To ask her to organize the class reunion.

Or, a photo taken on the day of their graduation had finally been developed, and she was being asked to distribute it.

But even with these, it wasn't exactly clear why Yumi would be the one to be asked. It wasn't like she'd been the class representative or anything –

Yumi hadn't been a particularly conspicuous student during middle school, which was neither good nor bad.

Yumi was still pondering it as she finished her cleaning duties and headed to the middle-school staff room.

"Pardon me."

Up until a year ago she'd come here from time to time, but she felt out of place now and hesitated as she entered. From the entrance she confirmed Aota-sensei's desk, and was walking towards him when the gentleman with the silver-gray hair looked up from his library book and noticed her.

"You haven't changed, huh?"

Aota-sensei stuck a nearby tag in the open page and closed the book. She'd initially thought it was a complicated science textbook, but it looked to be a mystery novel. Aota-sensei ducked beneath the desk and placed the book in a paper bag by his feet.

Despite being Japanese, Aota-sensei looked exactly like Dick Bruna, the author of children's books, and because of that he was nicknamed "Miffy-chan." An unfortunate coincidence for the school teacher whose full name was Aota Mitsuo. Well, Miffy-chan was cute, so he probably wouldn't mind too much.

"Fukuzawa-kun, I hear you're this year's Rosa Chinensis en bouton? Do your best, okay?"

"Okay ... "

It was a bit strange to hear a middle school teacher call her Rosa Chinensis en bouton. On top of that, recently she hadn't been behaving in a manner that could be described as 'doing her best.'

Aota-sensei probably didn't know about that as he smiled happily, then slowly and deliberately said:

"Lillian's Girls Academy – Fukuzawa Yumi."

"Yes?"

"One should always write their name on their belongings."

"Huh?"

What was he talking about? Yumi's eyes darted about as she tried to comprehend. But the answer was not forthcoming from Aota-sensei. Come to think of it, his classes had been like this too. He'd touch down some distance away, then bit-by-bit bridge the gap as he laid out the proof.

"I wonder if you can remember, some time ago you shared your umbrella with me."

"... Not really?"

"It was in the morning, by the statue of Maria-sama. You called out to me as I ran through the rain, and let me share your umbrella. Since I drive, it was only when I got to school that I noticed I'd forgotten my umbrella."

"Mmm."

Now that he mentioned it, something like that may have happened. It certainly seemed plausible enough. It probably happened three years ago.

"Ah, I see, you don't remember it. To you, it probably wasn't that special that you would remember it."

"Umm?"

"It was a blue umbrella. You told me that your grandfather bought it for you. You said you really loved that umbrella."

"Yes."

But that umbrella was gone now too. It had disappeared from the umbrella rack at a convenience store ten days ago.

The clerk had said that it probably wouldn't come back, and she'd received no call to say it had been found. There was no way someone who could steal someone else's umbrella so thoughtlessly would go to the effort of returning it.

"When you shared your umbrella with me, I praised your umbrella. In truth, I wanted to praise your actions, but I thought you'd be happier if I complimented the umbrella. Because I'm taller than you, you let me hold the umbrella. So I took the handle. It had your name written on it. Lillian's Girls Academy – Fukuzawa Yumi."

"Yes."

"I asked the question that came to mind immediately. Why did it have the name of your school on it, and not your address?"

"Ahh – "

Yumi gave a big nod. She remembered. She'd definitely had that conversation with Aota-sensei.

"My grandfather wrote it."

Carved with a needle, then colored over with white crayon. After shining the outside with a cloth, the white letters magically rose to the surface of the blue plastic handle.

"Right. Your grandfather. The one who gave you the umbrella."

"Yes. He said that I should be careful about which belongings I write my address on."

Writing her name on it was to prevent someone else who owned the same thing from taking it accidentally. But if it was lost, that wouldn't help a bit. – That's what her grandfather had said. Still, she didn't really understand why he had written "Lillian's Girls Academy" beside her name.

"You know, Fukuzawa-kun, recently there's been some events that made me want to believe in something like fate."

"Fate?"

Another detour. Just when it seemed like the conversation had been heading somewhere promising.

"Perhaps I should call it Maria-sama's guidance."

Aota-sensei stroked his mustache, which was slightly whiter than his hair.

"I've found myself thinking back on the few minutes I spent chatting with you on the walk to the school building, and wondering why."

Yumi thought, "And in return, I forgot about it completely – sorry."

"There were other students around. If it hadn't been you, I'm sure there would have been another Lillian's student who would have happily shared their umbrella with me. And if they'd also asked politely, I would have held the umbrella too."

Aota-sensei continued.

"So, why, I wondered, was it you? During class, you didn't really stand out much, but you weren't overly shy either, you were the stereotypical ordinary student. You didn't volunteer answers, but you'd answer when I called upon you. Nor did you forget your homework. But you weren't an honors student. You made lots of careless mistakes, so your grades were always right around average."

"Umm ... "

If Aota-sensei wanted to reminisce about events in middle school, he didn't have to go to all the trouble of calling her here. Yumi reluctantly admitted that it might have been different if she'd been brilliant, but she didn't understand the point of calling her here and reminding her of her inconspicuousness and numerous careless mistakes.

"You're the kind of person whose virtues aren't obvious when you're right there, but with time and space they become evident, little by little."

"Huh ... "

"Hahaha, I seem to have confused you ... Well then, let's return to the fate conversation. Here's what I was thinking. The reason I shared your umbrella was, of course, because you were the first person to call out to me. But perhaps it was fate that made you the first one to call out to me."

"Perhaps."

Despite Yumi's agreeable response, she only half understood what Aota-sensei was saying. Frankly, she wasn't all that good with these rambling conversations.

"Indeed."

Aota-sensei reached under the desk and quickly pulled something out of the paper bag.

"Because without that, your umbrella wouldn't have been returned to you."

"Ah!?"

Yumi cried out, seeing what flashed in front of her. But no words beyond that came out.

That familiar blue.

Grandpa's umbrella.

Aota-sensei opened the umbrella and offered it to Yumi. Beneath the hydrangea.

It wasn't raining, but the umbrella's flowers bloomed in the staff room.

Instead of raindrops, tear drops fell from Yumi's eyes.

Rather than starting with, "How?" she thought, "We meet again."

"Take charge of it, it's your umbrella, right?"

Aota-sensei said, "See," and showed her the handle. "Lillian Girl's Academy – Fukuzawa Yumi." There was no mistaking it, this was Yumi's umbrella.

"Sensei, how did this umbrella ... ?"

It seemed unlikely that Aota-sensei had been given the umbrella by the criminal who took it from the convenience store.

"Before we get to that, you must have lost it somewhere, right? I'd like to hear about that first."

Aota-sensei asked, seemingly irritated by her response. Yumi summarized what had happened, and he appeared relieved to hear it.

"I can accept that. The umbrella was so precious to you. I didn't think you'd carelessly forget it somewhere. But it was taken while you were in the shops. Such a calamity."

Aota-sensei looked like he was talking to the umbrella as he ran a finger along the fabric. While Yumi had been the victim of the calamity, it seemed as though a similar fate had befallen whoever took the umbrella.

"Well, now it's my turn. Yesterday evening, my daughter found it at a train station, picked it up and brought it to me."

Aota-sensei indicated the umbrella with his gaze.

"A train station?"

"Which train station do you think it was? Don't be surprised. It was Fukushima train station."

"Fu-fukushima? "

Even with the warning not to be surprised, Yumi instinctively repeated the name loudly. Fukushima station, that would be in Fukushima prefecture, in the Tohoku region.

"Yesterday, my daughter went to Fukushima to attend a friend's wedding. The umbrella caught her eye, leaning up against a rubbish bin. There was no-one near it, and it looked like it had been thrown away. I don't know if she sensed something, but she instinctively picked it up. And when she did, she saw the words "Lillian's Girls Academy" engraved in the handle, right? That's something she's quite familiar with. It's the name of her father's workplace."



"Yes."

"Normally, I suppose she would have taken it to one of the station employees, but she hesitated. Suppose, for arguments sake, that Lillian's Girls Academy was the private school in Tokyo and the owner was a student there, then it would be far more likely to reach the owner if she took it back to Tokyo with her. While Lillian's Girls Academy is fairly well known in Tokyo, they may not have heard of it all the way up in Fukushima. And since she was at a train station, it seemed unlikely that the owner would still be there. Even if it had been lost at Fukushima train station, they might not be able to find the owner. So while it may have been against the rules, she brought it to me. Don't you think that kind of feels like fate?"

"It does."

If Aota-sensei's daughter hadn't gone to Fukushima, then the umbrella probably wouldn't have found its way back to Yumi. Or if she had used Fukushima train station, but not noticed the umbrella, or picked up the umbrella, but the words "Lillian's Girls Academy" had faded.

But because it made its way to Aota-sensei, who remembered the umbrella, it returned home to Yumi.

Lillian's Girls Academy covered kindergarten through to university, so there were a huge number of teachers. Plus there were bound to be a number of girls with the commonplace name "Fukuzawa Yumi." So even if it made its way to the lost-and-found office, there was still the problem of connecting it to the Fukuzawa Yumi in the high-school second-year peach class.

"But you said you lost the umbrella ten days ago. I suppose it's had quite an adventure during that time."

"That's for sure ... "

Yumi closed the umbrella and hugged it. We meet again. You've finally come back. Aota-sensei stroked his mustache and watched on, apparently satisfied.

As she folded the umbrella, Yumi thought, "Huh?"

"Did your daughter make these repairs ... ?"

"No?"

"But these use a different thread to the repairs I've made."

The part where the fabric joined the frame had been reinforced, using a different thread to that which Yumi had previously used to repair the frayed edges. Whoever it was, they'd done a neat job. But instead of blue, they'd used pink thread.

"Hoho, the mystery deepens."

Aota-sensei laughed as he peered at it.

How the umbrella had spent those ten days apart from Yumi were unknown. Even if she wanted to ask, the umbrella didn't have a mouth, so couldn't tell her.

"Perhaps your umbrella would like to know how those ten days were for you too."

Hearing Aota-san's words, Yumi's eyes went wide and she softly stroked the umbrella's handle.

"It's been incredibly tough for me. I despaired when I lost my umbrella."

The umbrella and Sachiko-sama seemed to overlay each other. She became frightened that Sachiko-sama would disappear from before her very eyes, just like her umbrella had.

But, during this period of time when she hadn't seen Sachiko-sama, she'd been touched by so many other people. While she knew the world wasn't run just for her and Sachiko-sama, this was the first time she'd realized just how many people were living alongside each other.

Even in places she couldn't see, there were people going about their lives. While she couldn't see them, they were definitely there.

"But you look like you've recovered."

"Yes."

Not because her umbrella returned. She didn't think that Sachiko-sama's heart would come back just because her umbrella had returned home.

She knew she had to look at the bigger picture.

She'd erred because she had been only looking at Sachiko-sama.

Because Yumi loved her so much, and didn't want anyone to steal her away, she'd wrapped herself around Sachiko-sama like she was some kind of favorite toy. When it looked like Sachiko-sama's hand was slipping away, she'd bawled unreasonably.

Even though Sachiko-sama had never said anything. Even though she'd never spoken the words, "I don't want you."

It felt like some kind of light shone down, showing her the path. Yumi turned to Aota-sensei and bowed deeply.

"Thank-you very much, Aota-sensei."

"Do your best, Rosa Chinensis en bouton."

Aota-sensei smiled, his arms folded.

"Okay."

Yumi replied cheerfully, then turned around. She felt like she wanted to sprint off, but she was in the staff room, so she restrained herself.

What was it, this feeling?

Like she'd been set free, but that wasn't quite right.

Opening the door of the staff room, a refreshing breeze swept past her forehead.

Ahh, right.

That's what it felt like.

Yumi wondered what Sachiko-sama was doing right at that moment.

Part 2.

" – So, you came to help out?"

Shimako-san asked, blinking.

"Right. Is there anything I can do?"

After she left the middle-school staff room she returned to her classroom, but her excitement hadn't lessened. She had an overwhelming urge to do something, and to tell someone about it, so Yumi headed straight for the Rose Mansion.

Yoshino-san and Rei-sama were out at club practice, so once again it was just the diligent White Rose sisters steadily going about their work.

"At the very least, I'm delighted that you're feeling well again, Yumi-san. As for what to do ... well."

Shimako-san shrugged her shoulders, and clipped a stack of documents together. There was lots to do, in fact, so much that it was hard to tell where she should start.

"Sachiko-sama's been absent, while Rei-sama's been coming before school and during lunch. Even then, I think there's too much."

"I see, so that's how it is."

This time last year, the Roses were all third-years, three in a row. While Shimako-san was currently Rosa Gigantea, she wasn't even Rosa Gigantea en bouton a year ago, so she didn't have any direct experience in preparing for the school festival.

"While I did frequent the Rose Mansion, I refrained from involving myself directly. If I knew it would turn out like this, I would have participated more actively in the meetings and preparations."

Shimako-san smiled ruefully. But it was undoubtedly because of the way she looked back on last year that she was putting all her effort into it this time around.

"Here, Yumi-sama."

Noriko-chan gently set a cup of tea down in front of her. Yumi was grateful, because she'd worked up quite a thirst running all the way here.

"Thank-you."

It was delicious. The sight of Noriko-chan standing by the sink, or taking a cup from the shelf, was that of a splendid Rose Mansion occupant. She wasn't the 'assistant' from before. She had a self-confidence that seemed to Yumi to come from the rosary she wore beneath her school uniform.

Shimako-san and Noriko-chan put down their work and sipped their tea. Without some outside impetus, it looked like they'd forgotten to take a break. Shimako-san smiled ruefully, saying that taking breaks was better from an efficiency perspective, but they were both persistent type of people.

They were both equally beautiful, but it wasn't as though these well matched soeurs didn't have their own troubles.

"Returning to our conversation."

Yumi said, after a pause.

"It seems we're understaffed at the moment."

"Yes, more or less."

Shimako-san agreed.

"I wouldn't say we have enough people. Although, compared to last year, there are no fewer members of the Yamayurikai."

Last year there were three Roses, two boutons, and one bouton's petit soeur (Yoshino-san) for a total of six people. Shimako-san was not officially Sei-sama's petit soeur at the time.

This year, there were three Roses and three boutons. Six people, the same as last year, but getting them all together was the problem.

Rei-sama was busy with her club, like last year, but so too was Yoshino-san this year. Sachiko-sama was frequently absent. Yumi was ... planning to help properly from now on, but, well, let's just set that aside for now.

"Do you think we should ask someone to help out?"

Yumi proposed, as a way to alleviate their current staffing shortfall. Even with Yumi's return, she didn't see any way that she alone could completely fill the hole left by Sachiko-sama.

"Who would we ask to help?"

Shimako-san answered Yumi's question with a question. Judging by the tone of her voice, she didn't have much interest in this idea.

"I hadn't really thought that far."

Yumi shrugged her shoulders and said, "I was just putting it out there."

Although there would probably be quite a few students willing to help out with Yamayurikai work. They could choose from among the members of the school festival committee, or, if so inclined, they could recruit through the school's newspaper, the Lillian Kawaraban.

Then Shimako-san seemed to sigh as she said:

"In that case, wouldn't it be better for Yumi-san or Yoshino-san to find a petit soeur?"

"My my. Oh Shimako-san, you've become quite the Rose."

Yumi laughed, joking.

'Find a petit soeur' was the kind of cliché phrase that generations of Roses had said to their petit soeurs. Just recently, Shimako-san had been assailed by Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama with it.

"It's because I have a petit soeur. I'm more at liberty than you, Yumi-san."

"I see."

Yumi glanced at Shimako-san's petit soeur and understood. Noriko-chan accepted Shimako-san's words with a smile.

Shimako-san had probably stepped up. Noriko-chan was now filling the position that, until recently, had been Shimako-san's, and Shimako-san had been pushed forwards.

"If Rei-sama takes a break from her club activities, and Sachiko-sama returns to school, then I think we'll make it. But even so, what on earth is Sachiko-sama doing, I wonder?"

"... Yeah."

Yumi couldn't provide an answer to Shimako-san's question.

"Ah, I wasn't specifically asking you, Yumi-san. It was an innocent question."

Shimako-san frantically waved her hands, while behind her Noriko-chan murmured:

"It seems like something has happened to Rosa Chinensis."

"What do you mean?"

Two people asked simultaneously.

"Well ... I tried asking, but Touko didn't let anything slip."

" – Touko-chan, huh."

Yumi had mixed feelings uttering that name.

"It seems she knows something. She hadn't said anything, but that's the feeling I get. I apologize, but I think it has something to do with the reason Yumi-sama and Rosa Chinensis were avoiding each other ... "

Indeed, that's what would spring to mind. Yumi's initial, incomplete understanding was that Touko-chan and Sachiko-sama were keeping a secret. That Touko-chan knew something that Yumi, the petit soeur, did not. So she became anxious, and felt like she was being shunned.

A secret that only Touko-chan knew. It was a bit heartbreaking.

However.

Now, looking at it objectively, it seemed likely Sachiko-sama probably hadn't chosen to confide in Touko-chan. Since they were relatives, albeit distant ones, Touko-chan may have found out through a different route.

"Sorry that I couldn't provide more help."

Noriko-chan bowed deeply, as though she'd done something wrong.

"No, it's alright, thank-you."

Yumi responded, expecting this to be the end of the conversation, however:

"Ah, one more thing."

"Huh?"

Noriko-chan raised her head and continued talking.

"Yumi-sama, I apologize completely for Touko-chan's nastiness the other day too."

"..."

Yumi considered that to be completely unrelated to Noriko-chan. But perhaps she was acting as a friend.

If Yumi heard a rumor that Yoshino-san had unfairly insulted somebody, then she would apologize to that person. If the rumor were about Shimako-san, then first of all she wouldn't believe it, since that didn't seem like something Shimako-san was capable of doing.

"Despite what she did, at heart I don't think she's bad."

Noriko-chan was something of a worrier too.

"... Perhaps."

Yumi already knew that.

It was just that there were times when she became too consumed with hate.

But that seemed like it could be quite an obstacle when it came to relationships with other people.

Part 3.

The rain fell gently all through Tuesday morning.

When lunchtime arrived, the sun didn't come out, but there was at least a break in the rain.

The morning TV weather forecast had said, "Rain, with occasional cloudy periods," so they were currently in one of those 'occasional' times.

"So?"

The young lady with vertical hair rolls stood on the rain-slicked pavement, looking straight ahead, almost glaring. Raindrops glistened on the shrubbery leaves.

"What did you want with me?"

Was her bad mood because she couldn't stand being called out by a senior? Or was it because she didn't want to look at Yumi's face?

Well, maybe it was both.

Touko-chan was being honest, and hadn't tried to conceal her displeasure ever since they left the classroom.

"Are you going to continue where we left off before?"

She looked straight at Yumi, her eyes open wide.

"Continue what?"

Yumi asked, not immediately recalling. Touko-chan snorted, perhaps thinking she was feigning ignorance.

"There's quite the rumor on the streets, perhaps you plan to turn that rumor into reality."

That Touko-chan had slapped Yumi, or that they'd fought over the rosary? Either way, if they got into a physical scuffle, the sisters would put a stop to it. Well, things had been quite lively up until a little while ago.

Still, even if there was a rumor doing the rounds, it was only within the high-school. To call that 'the streets.' Touko-chan was exaggerating a bit.

"Perfect. There's quite the crowd, we're not lacking witnesses. Now to give them something."

"Witnesses ... "

Yumi discreetly glanced around. While there weren't that many people in the courtyard, there were students gathering around the windows in the school building that faced the courtyard, obviously watching them.

"If you do anything to me, Yumi-sama, I'll cry. Even if it doesn't hurt, I'll bawl."

"... Ever the actress."

Yumi thought Touko-chan was trying to make a big scene. As if that was the way to behave over a simple misunderstanding. While the rumor about her and Touko-chan was finally dying down, who knows how she'd be labeled if she called a younger student out here and made her cry.

Seeking to change the mood, Yumi cleared her throat and said:

"First of all, I wonder if you could relax your fighting stance."

"Okay?"

Touko-chan asked, looking dubious. Probably trying to find some hidden meaning to her words.

"Look around. Umm, you said it yourself, Touko-chan, there's lots of people watching."

Not just from the first-floor windows either, there were students watching from the second and third-floor windows too.

"Then, why did you chose this place?"

"For the appeal."

"Huh?"

Touko-chan's voice sounded strange as she questioned Yumi's answer.

"You and I don't have a bad relationship. Right, Touko-chan?"

Yumi turned towards the school building, then smiled and waved at the gallery.

"Wait, hold on, what are you doing, Yumi-sama!?"

Touko-chan hastily grabbed Yumi's hand and pulled it down.

As for the people watching, they had all sorts of reactions ranging from awkwardly looking away to happily waving back.

"Geeze, that's embarrassing, stop it already."

"They're so far away that our voices won't carry. So if we smile as we talk, it'll look like we're friendly."

"... You're overdoing it."

Touko-chan sighed in exasperation. With one thing and another, her fighting stance had been completely canceled.

In truth, Yumi had chosen the courtyard because the rain had stopped and it felt good, so this had been an unintended side-effect.

"But when you said before that we don't have a bad relationship, that's not quite right, is it?"

Touko-chan muttered, her brow wrinkled.

"Oh, so you're boldly declaring that we have a good relationship? But, don't you think that's going a bit too far, too fast?"

"That's not what I meant!"



Touko-chan balled both her hands into fists, reached up, then swung down with them. Performing such a violent action in front of the crowd would probably count against her if she pretended to cry later.

"Ah."

Whether she'd just noticed this, or simply decided that her actions were improper, Touko-chan seemed to calm down and straighten herself up, then she brought a handkerchief up to her mouth and said:

"You and I do not have a good relationship. And that's fine."

She leaned in close to Yumi, as though whispering a secret. But Yumi didn't agree with that sentiment.

"Don't say that."

Right, speak plainly. Don't take a stance that prevents the message from being conveyed.

"Why not?"

"That's, umm ... Uhh, what was it?"

The reason had completely slipped her mind momentarily, perhaps because they'd been talking too much.

"Umm ... Yumi-sama?"

Like she'd just been struck by a headache, Touko-chan touched her temples and creased her brow.

"Please think things through properly before speaking."

It wasn't as though this was completely unplanned. Last night, Yumi put her usually under-utilized brain to work and eventually came up with a solution. But, since she had forgotten the main point, she still had a way to go. Having said that, she'd have also looked quite stupid if she kept referring to notes during the conversation.

"Ahh, right. Now I remember. I wanted to ask you to help out with the Yamayurikai, Touko-chan. So it'd be a problem if we had a bad relationship. That's what I wanted to say."

"Huh?"

This time Touko-chan brought a hand up to her ear, like a granny that had forgotten her hearing aid. Her hand brushed a hair roll, causing it to sway like a spring.

"Just until the end of semester. There's no pay, but there's all-you-can-drink tea. What do you think?"

"... And that's why you called me out?"

Naturally, Yumi nodded vigorously. Other than calling her out, how would she have seen her?

"Rei-sama's semester's packed, she's busy with club activities at the moment. So, just for now, we need an additional pair of hands."

The kendo club had an unexpectedly large number of new members this year, and most of them were beginners. But the number of people who could lead hadn't kept pace, so it seemed to be quite a struggle. Most of the third-years had retired, to prepare for their university entrance exams. The only remaining ranked members were Rei-sama and the club president, as well as two second-years.

Since these girls had gone to the effort of joining the club, Rei-sama wanted to watch them practice, at least while they were learning the fundamentals, which meant she was going to club activities as often as she could. Yumi thought this was because she wanted to ensure they knew the joy of kendo.

After summer vacation, focus would shift to the school festival and she'd squeeze in some Yamayurikai work, but after the school festival came the autumn kendo tournament after which she'd retire, well, that was the plan anyway.

"That's quite a selfish tale."

Touko-chan responded coldly, having listened to Yumi's explanation.

"How so?"

Yumi thought it best to progress the conversation as calmly as possible, and put all her effort into smiling.

"Rather than having Rei-sama and Yoshino-san stop club activities, you're looking for outside assistance. Don't you think that's a bit odd? Even if it was a farce, the Roses were elected to be the students' representatives. If it's an obstacle to their Yamayurikai work, shouldn't they stop their club activities? If they wanted to do something like kendo, they shouldn't have signed up for the school council."

"While they are representatives, they're still students first of all. Even the Roses have the right to participate in club activities ... umm, on top of that, each and every high-school student is a member of the Yamayurikai, an organization that's there to support the Roses – "

Yumi trailed off towards the end, but she felt like she'd offered something of a rebuttal. Maybe she would have looked better if she'd had more confidence and spoke more powerfully ... Speaking truthfully, she dreaded arguments.

"I understand what you're saying. But, Yumi-sama? Aren't you forgetting that, much like Rei-sama and Yoshino-san are busy with club activities, I'm busy with the drama club?"

"So come on the days you don't have club activities."

"In the lead up to the school festival, I'm busy e-v-e-r-y day."

Touko-chan looked away.

"Has the drama club finalized their rehearsal schedule? They still haven't got a script, so there shouldn't be practice every day, right?"

"..."

Yumi was, at least for now, Rosa Chinensis en bouton. She'd looked over reports and schedules from all the various clubs. Naturally, before she made the offer, Yumi had tried to understand Touko-chan's situation as best she could.

"The drama club president did say that things would start in earnest during summer break."

Touko-chan seemed to sense her general position. Although she didn't say anything, she sighed as if to say, "I'm beat."

"I suppose the others know about this?"

"Huh?"

"That I'll be coming to help."

"Ah, that – "

Yumi was beaming ecstatically, and Touko-chan didn't miss the chance to burst her bubble.

"However, I'll only help out while Rosa Chinensis is absent. I have no intention of helping out with Rosa Foetida or Yoshino-sama's work."

"Okay, I can accept those terms."

That was what Yumi wanted. In truth, Rei-sama and Shimako-san weren't really interested in the idea, so Yumi had gone out on her own to scout someone to help for a fixed term.

"But, why did Yumi-sama come?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, no, nothing ... Wait, what are you doing?"

Touko-chan threw herself backwards.

"Huh? I just thought we should link arms."

Yumi had only lightly brushed her arm, but Touko-chan didn't seem at all pleased by it.

"I told you, there's no need to try and be all friendly, geeze."

As she spoke, Touko-chan shook free Yumi's arm that had been entwined around her elbow.

"If our conversation is finished, I'll leave."

Touko-chan walked ahead, looking angry.

Her ears were just a little bit red.

White Parasol

Part 1.

Even by June 20, Sachiko-sama still hadn't returned to school.

A whole week. In all her time as petit soeur, Yumi had never known Sachiko-sama to be absent from school for so long.

Yumi tried asking the third-year pine group's homeroom teacher about the reason for Sachiko-sama's absence, but for some reason she wouldn't answer. She did, however, reassure Yumi that Sachiko-sama wasn't ill.

At the very least, it looked like Sachiko-sama hadn't been cursed with a cold by the heavy rain on the day of Yumi's apparent rejection, or caught a fever after getting mad at her petit soeur for not listening to what she was saying.

But if it wasn't due to illness, then why on earth was Sachiko-sama absent?

One of the first words that came to mind when talking about school absences was truancy.

But Sachiko-sama wasn't that kind of person. She hated running away. If there was an obstacle placed in front of her, she was the type of person to attack it and move forwards.

"Just what's going on – "

Yumi mumbled, laying her cheek down against the table.

After school in the Rose Mansion.

Having just completed two trips up from the first floor, to bring the cardboard boxes full of documents from last year's school festival up, some minor aches remained throughout her body. At times like this, the lethargy made its way to her head, and Yumi ended up saying whatever she was thinking.

"Hey, Touko-chan."

Yumi grabbed the sleeve that was in front of her and tugged gently.

"..."

But the owner of the arm within the sleeve pretended to ignore her. If this were a comic, it felt like the word "patience" would be written behind her in bold lettering.

"Hmm."

But when that sort of thing happened, it was human nature to become even more stubborn. Even though she hadn't done anything yet, Yumi knew she had the attention of the girl beside her. And what would the younger student do, when the older student toyed with her a bit?

"Hey, hey."

"Ahh, so annoying. Won't you just leave me alone already?"

Her patience finally coming to an end, Touko-chan shook off Yumi's fingers that had been gripping her sleeve.

"I worked up my courage and tried ringing her house, but Sachiko-sama wasn't there – Touko-chan, you know something, right? Couldn't you just tell me?"

"Who knows?"

Her expression said she knew but wouldn't tell, as she pointedly arranged the documents in front of her.

After all that had been said, Touko-chan had decided to come to the Rose Mansion and help out at lunchtime and after school on days she didn't have club activities. She was a temperamental person, so there was some unevenness in her work, but overall she handled things easily enough and earned a passing grade as an assistant. So as long as she kept her complaints to a minimum, there wouldn't be anything to object to – although since she was there for a fixed-term and getting all the tea she could drink in lieu of pay, it would be inconsiderate to be anything other than grateful to her.

Although they were in the same room and sitting around the same table, Shimako-san and Noriko-chan didn't join in the conversation. They were watching Yumi and Touko-chan's back-and-forth out of the corner of their eyes, whispering to each other things like, "Yumi-san's like a clingy drunk today." ... Even though she could hear them perfectly.

Thump.

Oh, Touko-chan. She shot up and rushed over to Rei-sama, who had just now entered the room.

"Rosa Foetida."

Finding no support from the White Roses, Touko-chan seemed to have changed her battle plan.

"Oh, what is it, what's the matter?"

"Please listen to me."

Batting her eyelids, she snuggled in against Rei-sama. It was most fortunate that Yoshino-san wasn't there. Fortunate for Rei-sama, that is.

"Rosa Foetida, is Yoshino-sama still at the martial arts hall?"

Noriko-chan asked, having risen from her chair. It was probably best to know before she started preparing the tea leaves and cups.

"Yeah, I think she'll be a little while yet. The faculty adviser and club president were both there today, so I left ahead of everyone. Oh, black tea? What to do, I was in the mood for some coffee today. Ah, it's alright Noriko-chan, I can make it myself."

"No, no, let me get it."

This sparked a discussion between Rei-sama and Noriko-chan about who should make the coffee, which devolved into, "I'll do it," "No me," until Touko-chan forced her way in, saying, "Listen to what Touko has to say."

"Sorry. What was it you wanted, Touko-chan?"

"... Please swap seats."

Since she'd had to wait, the tension had completely drained from Touko-chan, but she pulled herself together, focused her strength in her eyes and asked.

"Swap seats?"

"Sitting next to Yumi-sama is no good for Touko's mental health."

Hoho, although she seemed to listen cordially, Rei-sama rejected Touko-chan's plea surprisingly quickly.

"No can do."

"Why not?"

Touko-chan scowled. The feeling was one of, "How dare you not agree when I asked you so nicely."

But Rei-sama was accustomed to Yoshino-san, so she was completely unperturbed by this.

"The simple answer is that Touko-chan is an assistant that Yumi-chan brought along. I'm sorry, but we can't involve ourselves in that at all."

Rei-sama sought support and Shimako-san raised her head from her writing and nodded. Noriko-chan, who was making Rei-sama's coffee, shook her head, making an appeal to Touko-chan about something.

"Of course, we're grateful that you came to help out. But, how to put this ... we shouldn't be moving things around too much while Sachiko's not here. Having said that, this was Yumi-chan's request, and we are short-handed, so you're here as Yumi-chan's exclusive assistant, and that's how it is. Sorry."

Right. Sorry, but that's how it is.

Because Touko-chan was someone that Yumi had scouted to help out. She didn't have to get agreement from everyone to bring an assistant. When Shimako-san first started coming to the Rose Mansion, nothing had been said to the then-Rosa Gigantea, Sei-sama.

Of course, if someone said that they were totally opposed it, then it would be discussed further. In this case, there was a one-month time limit, and neither of the Roses (discounting Sachiko-sama since she was absent) had offered a dissenting opinion.

"You're not ... going to listen."

Touko-chan's face went bright red, like a boiled octopus, and she started slowly backing away.

"Don't worry, it's no big deal."

Yumi beckoned Touko-chan over, pulling back her chair, but Touko-chan didn't stop backing away.

Backing, backing.

"That's no good. For us."

Backing ... Thump.

Touko-chan's back collided with the biscuit door.

That was the impetus. Like she'd been struck by something, Touko-chan did a quick about-face, opened the door and flew out.

"Touko-chan!"

Yumi wasn't sure what had rubbed Touko-chan the wrong way, but there had probably been something building up that she just couldn't stand any longer.

While Touko-chan possessed the signature ability to ascend or descend the stairs without making a sound, this time she proved that she could make quite a racket when agitated.

Now then, what to do about the current situation?

"Yumi-chan."

Rei-sama said softly.

"While you're at it, why don't you stop by the clubhouse, and pick up the manga club's schedule."

"Roger!"

Yumi cheerfully responded, then left the room.

Assuming that it was necessary for someone to chase after Touko-chan, Yumi had been thinking that she should probably be the one to do it.

Part 2.

She descended the staircase and opened the Rose Mansion door, then saw Touko-chan running towards the rear of the school building.

Yumi hurried after her as fast as she could without running, fearful that she would slip and fall on the wet grass or fallen leaves.

It was the rainy season and it rained on and off every day, so while it wasn't currently raining, the ground hadn't dried out which made running difficult. But it should be the same for Touko-chan. As expected, Touko-chan slowed from a run to a fast walk, then finally to a normal walking pace.

"Stop following me."

Touko-chan called behind her to Yumi. When had she been spotted?

Still, if she was going to stop simply because she'd been asked to, she wouldn't have given chase in the first place. Yumi closed the gap to about five metres as she pursued Touko-chan.

"I just want to cool my head alone. Geeze, whenever I'm near you, it throws my rhythm completely off."

Touko-chan would sometimes do this – the complaints she made over her shoulder were as though she was talking to herself, not actively trying to drive someone away.

They continued walking past the school buildings, coming at last to the line of cherry trees.

"You know, this may be none of my business."

When they did, Yumi called out to Touko-chan's back.

"The season being what it is, I think this might be a bit risky, see – "

Before the words 'hairy caterpillars' could leave her mouth, Touko-chan abruptly squealed and took off running. The hairy caterpillars started to wriggle overhead when the cherry tree leaves became lush and green.

"I don't think just talking about them is going to make them fall."

But Touko-chan had taken off like an express train, and was already near the auditorium entrance. Yumi jogged along the trail beneath the cherry trees too.

Touko-chan seemed to be waiting for Yumi, as she only started walking again when Yumi had caught up to her. The path lined with ginkgo trees opened up in front of them.

"I just don't get it. About a week ago you were so timid that just watching you was irritating, but now all of a sudden you're so lively. Even though Sachiko-sama isn't here, you're lively."

Touko-chan mentioned twice that she was lively.

"Do you dislike it when I'm lively?"

"It doesn't matter either way. I have no particular interest."

Watching Yumi being timid annoyed her. But she didn't seem too pleased with her liveliness either. And yet she said she didn't have an interest. It was hard to understand someone else's feelings.

"Why me?"

Touko-chan asked, as they walked alongside each other.

"Why did you make me your assistant? What are you planning, Yumi-sama?"

"Planning?"

They walked slowly along the path that led to the main gate. They walked past the library. If they didn't turn right at the next intersection, each step would be taking them further away from the school buildings.

"That's what happened, right? The conversation earlier – it was you alone who decided to get an assistant, right? In that case, you would have been better off choosing someone who was easier to work with. I don't understand why you'd go to all the effort of having an eyesore like me alongside you."

An eyesore. Touko-chan was able to assess her own position quite coldly.

"For now, let's just say you were first in line."

Yumi answered.

"F-First in line!?"

Touko-chan stopped and asked loudly. Surprised by the noise, some of the students walking in front of them stopped and turned around.

"Oh no."

On the spur of the moment, they turned left, away from the school gates and towards the university buildings, and hid in the thick shrubbery. The rumor about Touko-chan sowing discord had been dispelled by her visits to the Rose Mansion, but it was probably better not to let everyone see them arguing.

"See, in the past you said you wanted to help the Yamayurikai, right Touko-chan?"

Yumi said quietly as she concealed herself in the shrubbery.

"I did, but that was to help Sachiko onee-sama – "

"And you are helping Sachiko-sama. Because you're covering for her while she's away. That's why I thought you were suitable."

In truth, that wasn't the only reason, but Yumi didn't have to divulge that to Touko-chan, so she didn't.

"It's a bit of stretch then to say that I was first in line."

There was a gap in the procession of high-school uniforms, so Yumi stood up, brushed the dirt from the hem of her skirt and said, "Maybe."

"Don't you think the people Sachiko-sama likes should work hard while she's away? That's why I returned home to the Rose Mansion too."

This time Yumi walked ahead.

"She likes us both? Returned home? Isn't it too late to be saying this? Especially since you ran off without listening to Sachiko onee-sama."

Touko-chan followed, eyebrows raised.

"That I did. But I told you my reason, didn't I?"

Yumi looked up at the sky.

"I honestly have no idea what's going on with my onee-sama."

Part 3.

The Lillian's Girl's University premises contained a western-style garden park.

There was a water fountain front-and-center in the garden, and the small splashes of water from it sparkled brightly, brilliantly reflecting the flowers and grass that surrounded it.

"So pretty."

Yumi instinctively rushed over to it. For now the area around the fountain was very quiet, but that was probably simply due to the time, and normally it was probably bustling with university students.

"Hold on, Yumi-sama."

Touko-chan had a shocked expression on her face, like a mother chasing after a mischievous child. They had swapped position at some point. The chaser and the chased.

"Ah."

Yumi muttered, then came to an abrupt halt. Touko-chan, who had been tailgating her, couldn't hit the brakes in time and crashed at full speed into her rear.

"... Oww. What the heck are you doing!?"

"Sorry."

Yumi's attention had been drawn to a figure walking from the gate towards them.

That person was someone that Yumi knew.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the figure holding the white parasol grew larger. Loosely tied gray hair and an elegant sky-blue kimono.

"Yumiko-san?"

She changed the angle of her white parasol to reveal her face and there was no mistake, it was Katou Kei-san's landlady, Ikegami Yumiko-san.

"My, it's Yumi-san. What an unexpected meeting, gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou, what brings you here today?"

Yumi walked Yumiko-san over to a bench near the fountain and offered her a seat. Yumiko-san produced a white handkerchief from behind her, spread it out over the bench, then sat down and smiled. She looked radiant in light makeup, and while this was only the third time Yumi had met her, she looked the prettiest she had ever looked.

"I came to see Katou-san, is she here, I wonder?"

"Umm, that's a bit hard for me to say – "

"Ah, yes, you're in high-school, Yumi-san. Then I might just wait here a while and see if she comes by."

Since they lived on the same property, if she waited at home then they would probably see each other in the evening. Perhaps Yumiko-san had some kind of pressing business.

"It's been decades since I came here, but the ginkgo tree path hasn't changed at all."

Yumiko-san turned and looked wistfully at the path she had just walked along. Yumi turned to look too, and saw a self-proclaimed actress keeping out of the spotlight. Breathing quietly, awaiting her turn.

"Are you one of Yumi-san's friends, perhaps?"

"No, I'm one year her junior. Yumi-sama is always gently guiding me."

Yumi had expected Touko-chan to sulk about being completely forgotten, but instead she smiled and greeted Yumiko-san with "Gokigenyou."

"Oh Yumi-san, and you told me you weren't popular with the younger students."

"Why that's absurd. Yumi-sama is an adored onee-sama to all the first-years."

"... Touko-chan."

Who is she an "adored onee-sama" to, who? The main cause of her unpopularity amongst the younger students should not be saying such a tooth-achingly sweet line.

But, looking at it from a different point of view, Touko-chan had read the situation and was acting the role of the obedient junior. In that case, Yumi should also refrain from saying what she wanted to, and play the part of the good senior. They didn't have to show their antagonism in front of Yumiko-san, who was visiting her alma mater for the first time in ages.

"May I inquire as to where you're returning home from?"

Touko-chan asked Yumiko-san, being so sociable that it was hard to believe this was their first meeting.

"Actually, it's the opposite. I recently learned the whereabouts of an old friend, so I thought I should pay her a visit. Today's the lucky day, I suppose you could say."

"A friend?"

"A long time ago, we had a falling out over something trivial. I'm going to make things right."

Now that she mentioned it, Yumi remembered Yumiko-san saying something about missing somebody the other day. Perhaps she had been talking about the friend she was going to see today.

Yumiko-san half-closed her eyes, like she was about to doze off. The setting sun's rays shone through the gaps in the lace of her retro white parasol, forming a polka-dot pattern on her white forehead and blushing cheeks.

"It's quite an old umbrella, isn't it?"

Yumiko-san smiled, noticing Yumi's gaze. Yumi thought, "Ahh, that's not why I was looking," but she knew that Yumiko-san wasn't bothered by old things, so she didn't refute her strongly.



Indeed, it was quite an old umbrella. But there weren't any negative connotations to that. Recently, it had become quite popular to reissue old designs, but this wasn't that sort of thing, it oozed personality.

Looking at it, it was quite beautiful. And since it was Yumiko-san holding it, it was all the more lovely.

"I was holding this umbrella the last time I saw her. I never could bring myself to throw it away."

Yumiko-san spun the parasol, like a merry-go-round.

"I'm going to say, "I'm sorry" – the words I couldn't say on that day. I wonder what she'll say to that."

"She'll forgive you."

At that time, along with the voice, a can of juice was held out from behind her.

"Sei-sama!"

"I was looking out the classroom window, and you looked like you were having a good time, so I escaped from my boring class. Here, have one."

Oolong tea, milk tea, apple juice and black coffee. Sei-sama let Yumiko-san choose first, then Touko-chan, then from the remaining two took the black coffee for herself, handing Yumi the apple juice.

"Thank-you."

Yumiko-san said, "I was getting a bit thirsty," and seemed to enjoy her milk tea.

"Thanks."

Touko-chan looked blankly at Sei-sama for a couple of seconds, then expressed her gratitude and opened the can of oolong tea.

"Should I call Kei-san over? We're in the same class."

Sei-sama's can of coffee was a bit smaller than the rest, and she drank it all in one go before asking Yumiko-san.

"It's alright. But if you could take a message for her, please. Tell her that I'll be away for a few days, so she shouldn't worry. If there's anything she

needs to do in the main house, she should feel free to use the spare key and go inside."

"... Umm, is it a long way to your destination?"

Sei-sama asked, hearing "a couple of days." Yumi was slightly concerned too. But Yumiko-san's bag did look to be closer in size to a small traveling bag than a handbag.

"It's a fair distance."

"Would you like me to accompany you?"

Sei-sama asked.

"Thank-you, but I'll be fine. My destination's a hospital. Even if something does happen on the way, I should still be able to get there."

Yumiko-san laughed, as though it was a joke, but Yumi didn't smile.

Because she knew it meant that Yumiko-san's friend had been admitted to a hospital. And that was probably why Yumiko-san was hurrying to meet her.

The three teenagers sunk into silence again.

Since Yumiko-san had said, "a long time ago," it may have been decades. What happened back then, why had they never met since, and why was she going to meet her now?

Those answers were Yumiko-san's alone. So Yumi didn't ask. Even though the hidden lid of the music box had been opened, she wanted what was inside to remain precious.

"I suppose I should be going soon. If I go straight to the bus, I should be able to catch an earlier locomotive than I had planned."

Even her use of the word locomotive was indicative of an earlier era.

"Alright then, to the train station. Is M station okay?"

Sei-sama deftly lifted Yumiko-san's bag. It looked like this was how they would part.

"What about your classes?"

Yumi blurted out.

"I told you before, right? It was a boring class. Besides, I'd rather accompany Yumiko-san."

"You delinquent."

Yumiko-san laughed.

"I'm just honest."

Sei-sama answered quickly.

"Well then, I suppose I should accept your offer."

Yumiko-san took hold of Sei-sama's offered arm, and smiled like a schoolgirl.

At the very least, Sei-sama was acting the part of the escort as well as any leading actress from the Takarazuka troupe.

From high-school students to old ladies, Satou Sei was kind to all women. – So cool that Yumi instinctively came up with a catchphrase for her.

"Have a safe trip."

As she watched Yumiko-san and Sei-sama shrink into the distance, Yumi thought:

"A reclusive misanthrope" – that was how Katou-san had described Yumiko-san – but surely that wasn't right. She'd closed the curtain during their first meeting simply because the rain depressed her. In truth, she was a friendly, cute granny. That was the only way that Yumi could picture her.

But Touko-chan muttered something entirely unexpected.

"She seems to be in good spirits today."

"Do you know Yumiko-san?"

Yumi turned around in surprise.

"No, this is the first time I've met her. But I chanced upon something that may go beyond your understanding of Yumiko-san."

"... There's a rumor she's a misanthrope."

"Ah, that might actually be true. She looks to be a difficult person."

Touko-chan said, as she tidied up the empty cans.

"What makes you think that!?"

"She has deep wrinkles here."

As she said this, Touko-chan pointed to the area between her eyebrows.

"In contrast, she had no wrinkles in the corners of her eyes, or around her mouth."

"Come to think of it, you're right."

Now that she'd mentioned it.

"It's proof that she hasn't smiled in a long time. All she's been doing is scowling."

Apparently the drama club had been doing research into how to make wrinkles with stage makeup.

"People's faces show their lives."

"But I only know that Yumiko-san."

That. Pointing towards the path lined with gingko trees. But the duo were no longer visible.

"Then perhaps something happened recently that changed her disposition. Strangely enough, it may be because of you, Yumi-sama."

"Me?"

"Touched by your optimism."

"Ooh, don't say that."

It was annoying that she couldn't refute this. Yumi wanted to argue about it for a little while, but it looked like it would be pretty hard to beat Touko-chan in a debate. – While Yumi braced herself, it looked like Touko-chan had been thinking about something completely different.

"A hospital, hey ... "

"Huh?"

"Speaking of hospitals, my grandfather has a hospital at the foot of a mountain in one of Tokyo's neighboring prefectures."

While Yumiko-san had mentioned that she was going to a hospital, Touko-chan's segue was quite abrupt.

"It's in the countryside, some distance from the train station, so it can be quite difficult to get to without a car. But it's quiet, there's plenty of

nature and fresh air, so it's got a good reputation with its patients. It has the feeling of a traditional hospital ... "

As she listened, Yumi wondered why Touko-chan was talking about this now. The hospital that Yumiko-san was going to probably wasn't Touko-chan's grandfather's hospital.

Something deep within her heart whispered, "What if."

What if.

"Is Sachiko-sama a patient there?"

Yumi asked timidly, and Touko-chan laughed, bringing the palm of her hand up to her mouth and going, "Ho ho ho."

"As simple as ever. Don't you know that Sachiko onee-sama isn't absent due to illness?"

"So that was just idle chatter?"

Yumi asked huffily, but Touko-chan didn't answer the question.

"See, I've been thinking various things. Like, you're not telling me about Sachiko-sama because you've been forbidden from saying anything."

"If I've been forbidden from saying anything, why would I be chatting about it?"

"You could be kindly giving me a hint."

"... How fortunate for you."

"I hear that from Yoshino-san a lot too."

Touko-chan snorted, to say, "I'll bet." She really was such an impolite junior.

"That was just a teaser."

"A tazer?"

"A story teaser, geeze."

It seemed to be something like the lead-in to a joke. Wasn't that what the comedians called it when they were setting up a joke?

But how on earth did the story about the old-fashioned hospital relate to anything? As expected, Yumi had no idea whatsoever.

Seeing that, what did Touko-chan do?

"Stop, stop."

She suddenly cried out.

"Even if I do nothing, sooner or later somebody will make a move."

"Huh? Wha?"

"That's all. Complain to them, I'm all worn out."

Touko-chan muttered, her shoulders drooping. When she finished her soliloquy, she turned to Yumi and said:

"Let's go back to the Rose Mansion. Right, while we're out, we should stop by the clubhouse and pick up the forms from the clubs that haven't submitted them yet. Do you remember which clubs haven't submitted their schedules yet?"

"... Manga club."

"Got it. Alright then, shall we go?"

It was bewildering, the speed of this exchange.

While Yumi's head was still spinning, Touko-chan had started walking down the path that would lead back to the high-school area. Naturally, it was a different route to the one they had taken earlier. Touko-chan hadn't lost her bearings.

"Made it to a good place in the end, though."

Once again, Touko-chan's words were incomprehensible.

"As a reward, I'll give you a piece of advice, Yumi-sama. If you can avoid it, you're better off not riding in a car driven by Suguru onii-sama."

"What?"

Even if she heeded the advice, Yumi didn't think it would be helpful. Even if she wasn't bothered by riding in his car, when would she ever have the opportunity? Beyond that, she didn't understand what this 'reward' was for either.

"It's dizzying if you're not used to it. Especially on unpaved roads."

At that time, Yumi completely missed the hint that was hidden in Touko-chan's innocent words.

Visitor

Part 1.

"Sooner or later" came surprisingly quickly, and it brought someone unexpected to her.

Saturday.

They'd completed the first stage of cleaning the classroom and Yumi had ventured away from the school building to dispose of the rubbish. The school's PA system echoed through the cloudy sky.

"High-school second-year pine class Fukuzawa Yumi-san. Please report to the staff room immediately."

Yumi thought, "Hey, the person they're calling has a name just like mine," as she set the garbage bag down in the collection area, but then she realized.

"Huh?"

"I repeat – "

The PA system called for Fukuzawa Yumi-san once more.

"Uh, uh, uh."

Fukuzawa Yumi from the second-year pine class. The only person that could be was herself.

This was the first time her name had ever been called over the school PA system, and a light panic set in. She picked up the garbage bag she'd just set down, turned around and took three steps forward before realizing what she'd done and putting the garbage back. Thankfully, she was on her own, so no-one saw this.

"What to do?"

Yumi stopped to think for a moment.

Wait, it wasn't only students that had done something wrong that were called for over the PA system. But recalling those close to her that had been summoned, like Satou Sei-sama during the "Forest of Thorns" strife, or Torii

Eriko-sama during the "Yellow Rose" paranoia, they had all been surrounded by the pungent scent of scandal.

"Maybe this has something to do with Touko-chan ... ?"

But the bad rumors had stopped completely when she brought Touko-chan in to the Rose Mansion. It didn't seem likely that the teachers would only have found out about this now either.

On top of that, she was being told to go to the staff room. Not the educational guidance room or the school principal's office, but somehow more befitting of Yumi's lowly stature.

"They said 'immediately,' so I guess I have to go."

Even after thinking about it, she saw no alternative. She wasn't brave enough to go home and pretend she hadn't heard. Yumi started walking back towards the school building and saw Shimako-san's classmate Katsura-san running towards her, brandishing her schoolbag.

"Wah, it's Yumi-san!"

Yumi didn't know why, but Katsura-san seemed shocked to see her, like she'd just seen a ghost.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't really know what's happening, so I came running back because I really wanted to tell you about it most of all, and then I saw you."

Katsura-san took hold of Yumi's hand and squeezed tightly.

"What did you want to tell me? Is it about the announcement?"

"What announcement?"

"Over the PA system ... right?"

Apparently they were both talking about different things.

"I told you, I've just run all the way back from the school gate. There's no way I could have heard any announcement."

Katsura-san said, puffing her chest out with pride.

"The school gate?"

Yumi asked. What possible reason could Katsura-san have to run all the way back here from the main gate?

"Right, the gate, the gate. I was so surprised, I had to come back. Pretty impressive, hey."

"What are you talking about?"

"The prince. Weren't you listening?"

Wasn't she listening? That was the first time Katsura-san had mentioned the word 'prince'.

"The prince came to the school gates in a bright-red pumpkin sports-car. I wonder who he's here for. Wearing a suit and all, he looks so much more dashing than before."

A bright-red pumpkin sports-car. Totally incoherent. However.

"The prince ... "

Yumi could only think of one person who could be a bright-red pumpkin sports-car driving prince.

The prince of the ginkgo nut country, Kashiwagi Suguru. Sachiko-sama's cousin, and provisional fiancé. Until Touko-chan's appearance, he had been Yumi's number one rival.

Last year, he had been recruited from the neighboring boys school to play the role of the prince in 'Cinderella' for the Yamayurikai executive's school festival production.

"The first-years were asking, "Who's that?" The second and third-years were all telling them, "It's the prince, the prince." There was a huge group of people looking on, like some boy-band photo-shoot."

Then Katsura-san got excited and wanted to tell someone all about it, and before she knew it she'd run all the way here. Kashiwagi-san had obvious good looks, the type that were incredibly well-received at an all-girls school.

"Was Kashiwagi-san by himself?"

"When I saw him, he seemed to be waiting by the car alone. That's the impression I got."

Katsura-san leaned against the wall of the school building and crossed her legs. Then she flicked her bangs.

"Oowah."

Yumi could picture it in her imagination. He would have been fine just waiting in the car, but no, he was the type of person who just had to get out of the car and grab everyone's attention. Since he was a narcissist who knew just how good he looked, he'd unashamedly adopt that sort of pretentious pose. Basically, the prince character. And the fairy-tale prince was most definitely never shy.

"So, what do you think, Yumi-san?"

"What do I think? Cinderella's absent."

If Kashiwagi-san was the prince, then Cinderella was Sachiko-sama. That was the play's cast, there was no way to shift the roles around. Incidentally, Yumi had played Older Sister B, one of Cinderella's tormentors.

"Don't you think he could be here for you? After all, you were last year's Miss Cinderella."

"... And this is the prize, huh?"

Miss Cinderella was an earlier award. But recognition as a heroine was the only prize she'd received for having the good fortune of going from unknown first-year student to Sachiko-sama's petit soeur.

"The prince probably just came to pick up Touko-chan."

They were both Sachiko-sama's relatives. They referred to each other as "Gentle brother" and "Touko," so it wasn't strange that he'd come to pick her up.

"Maybe you're right. That's kinda boring though."

Katsura-san joked, but she seemed refreshed now that she'd said what she wanted to say. Completely the opposite of when she'd come running up, Katsura-san said a polite farewell of, "Well then, gokigenyou."

"Ah."

Katsura-san had started walking back towards the school gate when she suddenly stopped, spun around and said to Yumi:

"So, what was the announcement that you were talking about, Yumi-san?"

"Ah –!"

Yumi cried out.

"Sorry, Katsura-san, I've got to go. I'll tell you all about it next time."

She quickly wiped the soles of her indoor shoes on the mat, then flew into the school building. Thanks to Kashiwagi-san, she'd completely forgotten about it.

Ah, but even so.

Since the announcement had said 'immediately,' just how much tardiness would they accept?

Part 2.

About a dozen people had gathered in front of the staff room.

"Ah."

Yoshino-san spotted Yumi and raised her arm.

Just like the other times, students other than the one called had spontaneously gathered at the designated location.

Taking a rough survey of the people in front of her, there was Rei-sama, Shimako-san and Noriko-chan. They'd probably hurried over when they heard "Fukuzawa Yumi" called. It felt like they'd all dropped everything to come here.

As she looked at each of their faces, Yumi thought, "They're good friends alright."

Touko-chan was nowhere to be seen. Although Yumi hadn't really expected Touko-chan to be worried about her. Still, she was a bit disappointed by her absence. Well, it was after school on Saturday, so perhaps Touko-chan had gone home already. Even if she was still on campus, it was possible that she was somewhere where she couldn't hear the announcement – .

Setting that aside for now.

Yumi had no idea whatsoever why she had been called here, and while she was still trying to figure out what sort of expression she should have, a group of students encamped near the door to the staffroom made their way over to her. The mood wasn't right for a greeting of "Gokigenyou," so they simply bowed to their target.

(... Thanks for everything.)

The newspaper club's Mami-san and the photography club's Tsutako-san could always sniff out when something was happening, and as expected they had both gathered here.

The rest were probably just curious onlookers. They had their backs to her, so they hadn't noticed that Yumi had arrived, clumped together in a circle like a dumpling.

"It's Yumi-san."

One of them noticed her and whispered to the others, and the dumpling fell apart in the twinkling of an eye. Like the blossoming of a flower bud, a single young lady appeared in the center. That person was –

"Rosa Chinensis!?"

"Gokigenyou, Yumi-chan. It's been a while."

She was wearing a dark suit that blended in with the Lillian's school uniforms, so Yumi hadn't noticed someone in street clothes mixed in among the group. It was indeed Rosa Chinensis. Well, more accurately, it was the former Rosa Chinensis, Mizuno Youko-sama, magnificently taking center stage like "The Birth of Venus," as she turned to Yumi and smiled.

"Wh-what on earth brings you here!?"

Yumi rushed over to her. Youko-sama slowly moved forwards to meet Yumi. Youko-sama really felt like an adult, perhaps due to her light makeup. It seemed unbelievable that until just three months ago they had worn the same school uniform.

Her muted matte pink lipstick coated lips informed Yumi:

"I came to see you. I'd like you to come with me."

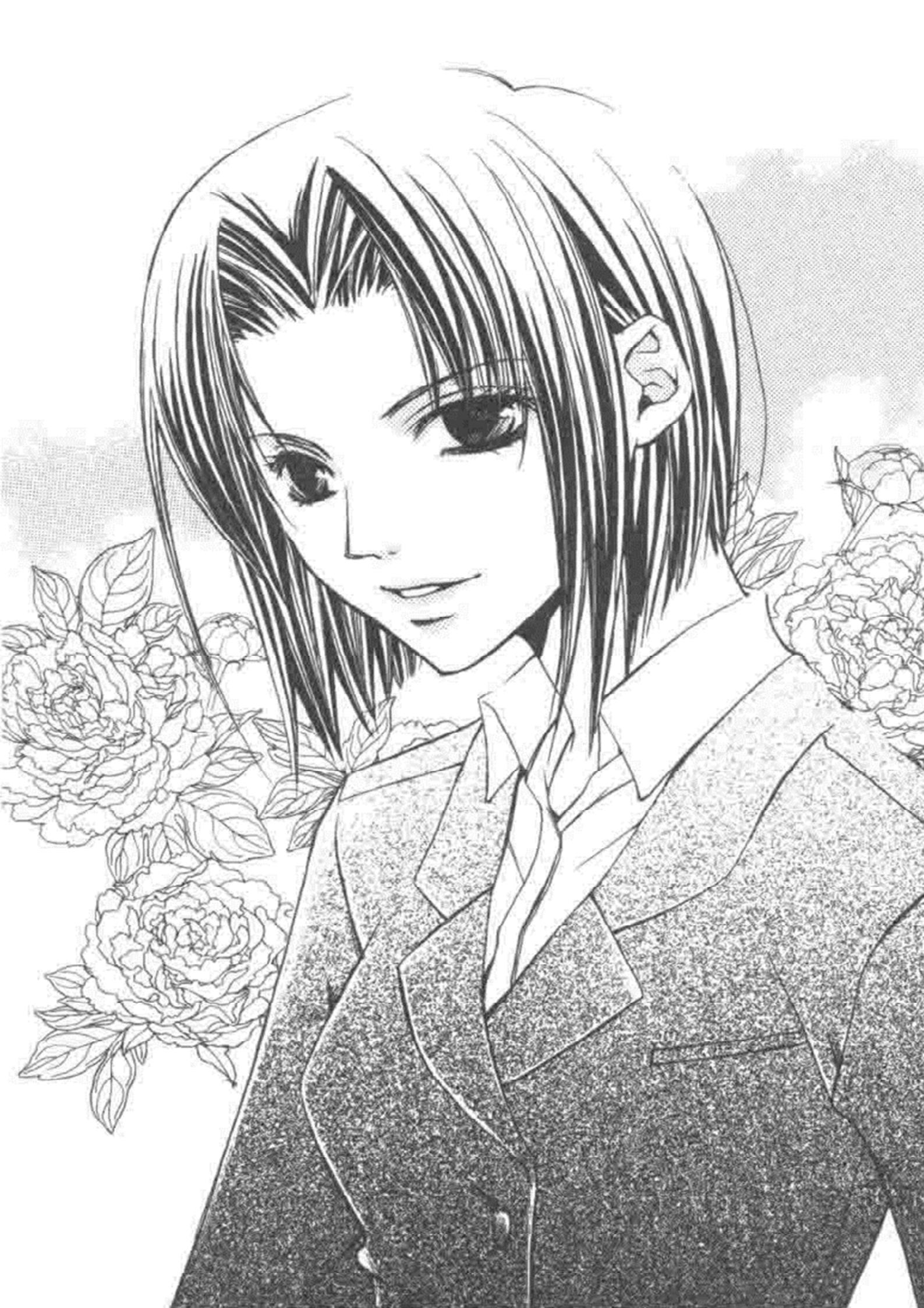
"Huh? But I was called to – "

Yumi pointed at the staff room right beside her, and Youko-sama smiled wryly.

"Took you a while. I was the one that asked the teacher to do that. It seemed the quickest way to catch you."

"Wh-wh"

"Why? Because I'm in a race against time."



Youko-sama spoke quickly.

"Hey, Yumi-chan, if you could help Sachiko, would you?"

"Yes."

Yumi didn't know what was going on, but to the question of whether she would help Sachiko-sama, the answer was always an unconditional yes.

"Then come with me."

Youko-sama took Yumi by the hand, opened the door to the staffroom and informed them:

"Teacher, Fukuzawa-san's here, thanks for all your help."

"Okay."

One of the teachers called back from inside. Apparently she'd made full use of her status as a former pupil and Rosa Chinensis to convince the supervisor and broadcasting club to summon Yumi. That was the ever-practical Youko-sama.

"Here, Yumi-san."

They set off walking down the corridor and Yoshino-san popped out in front of them and held out a schoolbag.

"Youko-sama said she was taking you away, so I rushed back to the classroom and got it."

It was indeed Yumi's schoolbag.

"Thank-you."

As she took the schoolbag, Yoshino-san gave Yumi's hands a quick squeeze.

"Good luck. Tell me all about it later."

"Okay."

It felt like Yoshino-san's power flowed into Yumi's body.

Yumi didn't know where Youko-sama was taking her, but it was to help Sachiko-sama, so she gladly went. If her hard work could help Sachiko-sama, then she'd work as hard as she could.

"Youko-sama, come and visit us again sometime."

"Next time, stay a little while longer."

The students that had previously been surrounding Youko-sama reluctantly waved and said their goodbyes. Yumi felt like she'd seen them somewhere before, so perhaps they were the former Rosa Chinensis' fan club, enthusiastic devotees of Mizuno Youko-sama.

Youko-sama looked back over her shoulder and waved briefly in response. But that was all. There were no lingering farewells, as soon as she took hold of Yumi's hand she moved quickly to leave the staffroom behind.

Youko-sama was silent as they descended the stairs and walked along the first-floor hallway. She kept walking, not saying anything about where they were going or why Sachiko-sama needed Yumi's help.

Even when they split up, Yumi going to her shoe box and Youko-sama going towards the visitor entrance, all she said was, "Well, I'll wait for you outside." She didn't seem angry, but she wasn't the usual brimming-with-confidence Youko-sama that Yumi knew.

When they rejoined in front of the visitor entrance, Youko-sama said nothing and started walking quickly.

Yumi felt like she'd only seen Youko-sama's face from diagonally behind for a while now. Perhaps it was due to the angle, but her expression looked quite stern.

"Umm."

Unable to endure the lengthy silence any further, Yumi started speaking.

"What?"

Youko-sama didn't stop walking, instead turning only her head as she questioned Yumi. Seeing her eyes for the first time in a while, Yumi bowed her head deeper than before.

"I'm sorry."

"What on earth for?"

As expected of Youko-sama, she stopped on a dime, turned and asked the question.

"You told me to take care of Sachiko-sama, and I – "

"Ah."

Should that response from Youko-sama be taken to mean that she knew the current state of affairs between Yumi and Sachiko-sama, or was there a certain amount of conjecture involved? Maybe she hadn't understood everything.

"I'm sure Sachiko's at fault."

Youko-sama said curtly as she resumed walking.

"But."

Yumi followed after her.

"Don't worry about it. It wasn't some grandiose commandment. If two people are only joined together because someone else tells them to, it will never work out. Things fall apart when it's their time to. I say that intentionally too."

Things fall apart when it's their time to. The impact of those words reverberated around Yumi's heart.

"So even if we say that you ran out of patience with Sachiko, I think that was unavoidable. But right now, I want you to come with me. And I want you to help Sachiko."

Youko-sama ran her hand through her short hair and smiled thinly.

"Even after graduation, I'll probably be her big sister for the rest of my life. That's why I've become used to doing such foolish things for her. Entering my alma mater, using the PA system for personal reasons, and now forcing a junior to accompany me."

"Ah."

Yumi had finally hit upon something.

"Don't tell me Kashiwagi-san too ... !"

There was no need to hear her response. Youko-sama had dragged Kashiwagi-san into this. Even though he wasn't romantically interested in Sachiko-sama, Kashiwagi-san probably cared for her deeply, so would have happily lent a hand to help Sachiko-sama.

"What happened?"

Sachiko-sama must be in dire straits to force Youko-sama and Kashiwagi-san to take action. But Youko-sama wouldn't tell her anything. The only thing she said was:

"All I'll say is that, right now, you are the one thing that Sachiko needs most in this world."

When they reached the statue of Maria-sama, Youko-sama said to Yumi, "Go ahead and pray," then gave her a gentle nudge forwards.

"And you?"

"I'll pass for today. I prayed earlier today, elsewhere. Don't mind me, I'm just not in the mood."

"... ?"

Yumi didn't really understand, but knew they were in a rush, so she hurried over to the statue and prayed.

For Sachiko-sama to be saved.

She made the request not knowing why Sachiko-sama needed saving.

As always, Maria-sama said nothing and smiled.

But that was fine. Having her watching over them like that was enough to bring comfort to Yumi.

"I look displeased, don't I?"

Youko-sama asked, after Yumi had run back to her.

"... A little."

After she answered honestly, Yumi thought, "Ooops," but she couldn't take back the words she'd said. However, Youko-sama smiled.

"It's okay. I am displeased. It annoys me that I couldn't do anything for Sachiko, despite how much I care for her. Like I was nothing. I adore you Yumi-chan, but I'm also feeling a little bit jealous ... it's complicated."

"Jealous?"

"Right. You're a big-shot. And I'm jealous of that."

In contrast to her words, Youko-sama gently embraced Yumi's shoulder as they walked together.

"Yumi-chan, do you love Sachiko?"

"I do."

"Okay. That's good."

Somehow, it felt like she'd had that same conversation with someone else recently.

Part 3.

"I've been awaiting your arrival, Cinderella."

Kashiwagi-san was posed exactly as Katsura-san had described, leaning against a red car.

Although there was some distance to the road, he was right in front of the school gate. Since this coincided with going home time, he and his beloved car stood out like a sore thumb.

"Quit messing around."

Yumi said somewhat coldly as Kashiwagi-san reverentially opened the rear door for her. Based on what Youko-sama had been saying, Yumi could tell that Sachiko-sama was in serious trouble, yet he still acted like it was a game. On top of that, Yumi wasn't Cinderella. She was Cinderella's mean Older Sister B.

"Uh-oh. Don't look so angry. For today I'm just a pitiful coach-driver mouse."

"You don't seem to know your part very well."

Youko-sama cynically raised an eyebrow. Kashiwagi-san raised both hands to shoulder level, in an "I surrender" pose.

"And your role today seems to be less the queen and more the witch. I couldn't possibly defy you."

"Why thank-you. Shall we go, Yumi-chan?"

Youko-sama smoothly rebuffed him and settled into one of the rear seats. Sadly, the coach-driver mouse holding the door open didn't receive a single word of gratitude.

"Umm. Are we going to be driving along mountain roads, by any chance?"

Yumi asked, just in case, before she got in the car.

"No, we're staying in the city. Why do you ask?"

"I've been told your driving makes people ill."

Touko-chan's advice. Yumi thought she'd never get to use it in her entire life, but the opportunity had come surprisingly quickly.

"Ahh, you're talking about that one time with Sacchan? Come to think of it, that was the day you rang, wasn't it?"

Kashiwagi-san had called Sachiko-sama, "Sacchan." Yumi really didn't like him addressing her like that.

"Hey, what are you two talking about? You could do that while we're driving, right?"

At Youko-sama's urging, Yumi hastily got into the car. A small cheer went up from the onlookers.

Kashiwagi-san also hurried into the driver's seat, then said to Youko-sama by way of explanation:

"I drove Sacchan up to the hospital once. That's what you were talking about, right Yumi-chan?"

He turned the key and the engine started.

"Sacchan got terrible car-sickness and swore she'd never ride with me again."

That hadn't really been what Yumi had been talking about, but there was no need to bring Touko-chan into the conversation, so she didn't say anything. More importantly, something he'd said had caught her attention.

"The hospital?"

The car took off smoothly. Indicating right, it entered traffic.

"Ah, the hospital with her grandmother, of course."

Kashiwagi-san said, shifting up a gear. Oh, the car wasn't an automatic.

"That day, I offered to take her because none of the Ogasawara cars were available, but Touko-chan pleaded with me to let her come too."

"... So that's what happened."

Sachiko-sama was visiting her grandmother in hospital that day. But Kashiwagi-san had said they went for a drive, so Yumi had been convinced that Sachiko-sama, Kashiwagi-san and Touko-chan had been out having fun together.

In that case, Sachiko-sama should have just told her from the start. That she couldn't go to the amusement park because her grandmother was in

hospital. Yumi wouldn't have objected at all. And she wouldn't have foolishly become jealous of Touko-chan.

"It's Touko's grandfather's hospital."

"Ah – "

At the foot of a mountain, where the air is clear, like an old-fashioned hospital.

"Oh, you didn't know, Yumi-chan? Her grandmother was at that hospital for the last year or so. Sacchan would visit her about once a month. Although it looks like she's been visiting more frequently this last month. While her condition was a bit more precarious... Uh-oh."

Kashiwagi-san slammed on the brakes as he said this. The car in front had stopped for a red light, but he hadn't noticed until quite late.

"Excuse me, driver, please keep your eyes on the road at all times."

Youko-sama leaned forwards and scolded him.

"You know, in general, you talk too much."

"Huh?"

Kashiwagi-san turned to look back at them, but Youko-sama's glare said, "Don't look this way," which pushed his gaze reluctantly forwards. The lights went green and the car took off again. Next to Yumi, Youko-sama sighed.

"Sachiko told me not to say anything about her grandmother."

"Really? But she didn't tell me, so it shouldn't matter if I say something, right?"

"So naïve. Sachiko didn't say anything to you because she couldn't have imagined you coming into contact with Yumi-chan."

They turned a corner. They'd now entered a part of the city that was foreign to Yumi.

"But your grandmother – "

Yumi mumbled.

"Ah, grandmother Ogasawara died a long time ago. This is Sayako-sama's mother. It's not that strange that you wouldn't know her, since they didn't live together."

Kashiwagi-san joined in the conversation even when he was turning the steering wheel. They were still in the city, so he wasn't making any sudden speed changes or any rash overtaking maneuvers. For the time being, he was trying to drive safely. Even so, it was occasionally terrifying.

"So how is her grandmother now ... ?"



Yumi inquired, and Youko-sama instantly sunk into silence. Even Kashiwagi-san, who had been so talkative up until this point, looked as though he was searching for what to say as he gripped the steering wheel.

From that, Yumi could more or less infer what had happened.

The two silent people were both wearing similar dark outfits. On closer inspection, their clothes weren't made out of characteristic mourning dress textiles, but seeing them together they looked like a young couple on their way home from a funeral. On his own, Kashiwagi-san just looked unmistakeably like a night worker though.

"They had a private funeral today. Her wishes were for it to be family only. So neither I nor Kashiwagi-san attended. I went and offered my condolences to Sachiko and her parents this morning."

Kashiwagi-san was the son of Sachiko-sama's father's sister, so while he was Sachiko-sama's cousin, he wasn't related to Sayako-sama.

"If they hadn't shut out everyone but immediate family, it almost certainly would have turned into a major spectacle due to the Ogasawara group connections."

"Yeah, that's probably true."

Unusually, Youko-sama agreed with Kashiwagi-san's opinion. But when Kashiwagi-san happily smiled at her, he once again earned Youko-sama's scorn.

"I told you before, don't look this way!"

Up until March he had spearheaded Hanadera Academy's student council, but he certainly didn't look that way when matched against Youko-sama.

"You know, you Yamayurikai executive members are all such strong women. Intense, I guess you could say ... Never kind to men."

"That's just because they're dealing with you."

" – So Youko-san says, but what on earth could she mean, Yumi-chan?"

"I think it's because even if they're hostile to you, you're not hurt or irritated by it."

Because he called upon her by name, Yumi said what she'd been thinking. But even though she thought she was sticking up for Kashiwagi-san, he seemed sincerely crestfallen, and not acting at all, as he slumped his shoulders.

"Is that because they don't look at me as a man?"

"Yeah."

"Say it clearly."

Yumi thought that way too. Because, honestly, even if they were hostile to him, he wasn't hurt or irritated by it.

"I thought you weren't particularly interested in girls, Kashiwagi-san?"

Despite being engaged to Sachiko-sama, he had sought same-sex romantic interests.

"No, I like girls."

Through the rear-view mirror, Kashiwagi-san smiled brilliantly at her. Maybe he didn't know that it wouldn't work.

"But you like boys better, right?"

"Ha ha ha. I'm no match for you, Yumi-chan."

Youko-sama listened to their conversation with her arms crossed. She seemed completely uninterested in what they were talking about, but it wasn't making her uncomfortable. Maybe she was using it to pass the time, like listening to the car radio.

Yumi wasn't bothered by it either. She had no interest whatsoever in Kashiwagi-san himself. If he started talking about resolving his engagement to Sachiko-sama, then she'd probably listen more intently. As long as Sachiko-sama wasn't involved, then he could get with whichever guys or girls he wanted to.

(Ah.)

No, there was one other thing that bothered her, so she decided to fire a warning shot, just in case.

"Don't you lay a finger on my little brother."

"..."

What was up with that silence?

"Don't tell me you've already done something!?"

Yumi leaned forwards from the back seat and shook Kashiwagi-san's shoulder. And when his shoulder shook, the hand on the wheel shook. Ruining Kashiwagi-san's driving ability.

"I haven't, I haven't. Just some light skinship."

"Light skinship ... ?"

Well then, that was a dilemma. She didn't know how far Kashiwagi-san's definition of 'light' extended. But she wasn't inclined to dig any deeper. While they were siblings, there was still the issue of intruding on Yuuki's privacy. Or, more accurately, she just didn't want to imagine it. A love scene between Kashiwagi-san and Yuuki.

"Don't worry, it's alright. He's normal."

Yumi let go of his shoulder and Kashiwagi-san breathed a sigh of relief. Youko-sama, who had been silent up until then, threw in her two cents worth.

"But don't you try to draw the normal into your abnormal world?"

"That sort of thing is amusing. But I just like seeing Yuuki when he's hostile."

Kashiwagi-san played the pervert spectacularly.

"What on earth could you possibly see in Yuuki?"

Yumi asked, and as he indicated right Kashiwagi-san said, "Let's see." Then, as though speaking to himself, he said:

"The Ogasawara bloodline probably has a latent weakness for the Fukuzawa-siblings type."

Part 4.

Even though it was her first time here, it seemed somehow familiar.

"Where are we?"

"Grandmother's house. Sachiko's here."

It was a quiet residential district just off a main street. At the end of a narrow street they came to an old-fashioned gate, shaped to look like a wall. After passing through this, a garden spread out around them that was cultivated to look like it was untouched.

It could be called cozy when compared to the Ogasawara estate, but for the metropolitan area, a western-style house stood on what could be described as palatial grounds.

Sachiko-sama's house was in a different direction, and since they'd said it was a private funeral she hadn't really expected a funeral house. – Such had been Yumi's thoughts as she rode in the car, but she hadn't contemplated that she might be brought to the grandmother's house.

"Long ago, this used to be a holiday house or something, when they had lots of estates. But with no heir, they were all sold off one-by-one, until only this was left. It seems like this was grandmother's favorite."

Kashiwagi-san parked his red car close to the gate. Yumi recognized the black car beside them, and, just as she thought, she recognized the chauffeur that was busily polishing the car.

"Ma'am, ma'am."

When the trio got out of the car, the chauffeur entered the western-style house ahead of them, to announce their arrival. Whereupon.

"Thank-you kindly."

Sayako oba-sama, wearing a black kimono, poked her head outside. Sayako oba-sama was Sachiko-sama's mother.

"Ah, Yumi-chan. I'm sorry, and thank-you."

When Sayako oba-sama saw Yumi's face, she hurried outside, putting on a handy pair of backless high-heels instead of the wooden sandals that were traditionally worn with a kimono.

"Oba-sama. Allow me to offer – "

Yumi's head had been so full of Sachiko-sama that she hadn't practiced saying her condolences. But, thinking about it, it would have been worse for Sayako oba-sama as she had lost her mother.

"Yes, yes. Condolences and all that."

Yumi felt a little dispirited seeing Sayako oba-sama cut her off so quickly. But having a member of the grieving family smiling coaxed forth an awkward smile from Yumi.

"Anyway, come in, come in."

Sayako oba-sama gestured to them.

"Come on. Youko-san, Suguru-san, you too."

However, Youko-sama stayed where she was and said:

"Would you mind if I had a look around the garden?"

Gardens where trees, weeds and grass were allowed to grow as they pleased had a much more interesting appearance than impeccably manicured ones. This one was like a jungle, and wasn't outshone by the Ikegami residence where Yumiko-san lived.

"That's fine. But there might be some insects about."

Sayako oba-sama warned her, but Youko-sama smiled and said, "That's alright."

That wasn't a joke, the garden looked like it would be crawling with insects. Ones with wings, ones without legs, ones with lots of legs – enough different types to start an insect collection. Thick vines that Yumi had once seen on an excursion to the mountains curled around the tall trees. A bit like a hiking course. In autumn, there would undoubtedly be an incredible harvest of nuts and berries.

"I guess I'll accompany her."

Kashiwagi-san smirked as he walked behind Youko-sama.

"Why you?"

Youko-sama scowled lightly.

"It should be fine, yeah? You somehow don't think of me as a man, right? So it shouldn't worry you. Or do you absolutely want to be by yourself? In that case, I'll hold back."

"... Honestly, you get bent out of shape over every little thing."

Victory to Kashiwagi-san this time around. Youko-sama turned and started walking, not trying to fend him off anymore. As he followed after her, Kashiwagi-san turned and waved to Sayako oba-sama.

"We'll come inside for tea in a little while."

"Ho ho ... Ahh, to be young."

Sayako oba-sama smiled, then put her arm around Yumi's shoulder and brought her to the entrance.

"Pardon my intrusion."

One step inside the house and Yumi was ensconced in the gentle aroma of flowers. But despite this, there wasn't even a hint of incense.

Thinking of funerals, the first thing that came to mind was the Buddhist rituals, but perhaps this family was different. Yumi had never attended a Shinto or Christian funeral service, so she didn't know how they differed.

"Should I pay my respects ... "

Yumi thought this was the right thing to do, but Sayako oba-sama said, "Later," and continued down the corridor. They passed what looked like a living room – the door was open, and the room was decorated with so many pure white flowers that it looked like it was overflowing.

"Prioritize the living over the dead."

Sayako oba-sama was talking about Sachiko-sama, that much Yumi knew.

At any rate, Sayako oba-sama's unexpected vigor was quite helpful. Vague by nature, and with every right to be pickled in tears, she was crisp and dry, like a mourning dress that had been sprinkled with a drying agent.

"Is it strange that I'm so lively?"

Sayako oba-sama said, reading Yumi's mind.

"Yeah, ah, no ... "

"In truth, I wept inconsolably up until my mother's death. But now, it's as though my tear ducts are exhausted. I used up the last of my tears during the funeral."

"Ah – "

Yumi could easily imagine Sayako oba-sama sobbing uncontrollably.

"But Sachiko didn't cry. It was as though she was being so reliable to make up for how unreliable I was. But in truth, she was pushing too hard."

"Pushing too hard ... ?"

"She wanted to cry, but she couldn't. She had to remain resolute. She had to brace herself. If she ever relaxed, she'd become despondent and not be able to return to how she was before. That's how it was for her."

As expected of a mother, Sayako oba-sama understood Sachiko-sama's disposition well.

"She lost her appetite, and it looks like she barely ate anything. But she went through the motions, so that nobody would notice."

She had an uneven diet at the best of times, so it probably wouldn't have seemed unusual for her to leave food on the plate. Even so, Sayako oba-sama or the household staff probably would have picked up on this normally, it was only due to her grandmother's critical illness that nobody took notice of Sachiko-sama's condition.

"When my mother died, I broke through my haze, but for her, she curled back in on herself, like a piece of thread that had been drawn taut and then cut."

Sayako oba-sama stopped in the corridor and looked straight into Yumi's eyes.

"She said without Yumi-chan there's nothing."

"Me ... ?"

Yumi asked, pointing at her nose. Me? You're really talking about me? – With an incredibly stupid look on her face.

"Sachiko didn't say anything to me, but apparently she let it slip when she was crying to Youko-san. She said that Yumi-chan hated her."

"I'd never!"

"Right ... that's right."

Sayako oba-sama smiled at her like a blooming flower contrasted against her mourning dress. As a human, she really was like a pretty little flower.

"Yumi-chan's a gentle girl. That you became the petit soeur of strong-willed Sachiko ... I'm so glad."

"But I'm not sure that we're connecting. Because I thought that Sachiko-sama hated me too."

"Oh my."

Hearing Yumi's words, Sayako oba-sama's eyes widened in surprise.

"So Sachiko did something to make you think she hated you?"

Sayako oba-sama gently adjusted Yumi's collar.

"That girl, whenever she talks about you, she has such an affectionate face. Seeing that face, anyone would be able to tell that she loves you, Yumi-chan. She even talked about you to my mother when she was in hospital, from time to time. She said that you were adorable. Really."

As she listened, the tears flowed.

Even if Sayako oba-sama was exaggerating slightly, Sachiko-sama liked her and thought that she was adorable, and she'd said, "That's enough already."

To anything and everything, that's enough already.

A lot had happened in the last month. But it had been painful and sad, and she'd felt useless.

The one or two, well actually, three or four complaints that she wanted to launch at her onee-sama seemed trivial, while there were comparatively far more things she regretted saying.

That's enough already.

Forget all that, for now all she wanted was to see her onee-sama.

That feeling of longing had come to the fore, and there was nothing else in Yumi's heart.

"This is the door."

Sayako oba-sama pointed to an interior door.

"Go to her."

"Yes."

Yumi had started to move even before she replied.

Onee-sama.

Yumi quietly opened the door.

Part 5.

"Onee-sama ... "

The room was dimly lit.

Perhaps that was unavoidable because it was cloudy out. But stepping from the hallway lit by incandescent lamps into the unlit room, the impression of gloominess couldn't be wiped away.

Facing the door was a large, open window, and the lace curtains fluttered silently.

It looked like it was somebody's bedroom, as the canopied bed and old, large, wooden cabinet were quite conspicuous.

Where was Sachiko-sama? Yumi focused her eyes and searched.

"Onee-sama."

Keeping the closed door behind her, Yumi called out.

Something near the foot of the bed moved slightly.

Initially, Yumi thought it might have been a dog. Before that, she'd believed it to be a bed cover that had fallen and crumpled together.

However.

"—"

That was Sachiko-sama. Lying across the bed, her legs on the floor, she raised her head slightly.

"Yumi ... ?"

The curtains fluttered in the breeze, and a little bit of sunshine made its way into the room.

Yumi's eyes widened in surprise. Sachiko-sama had lost a lot of weight and looked worn out. Even though she was wearing the familiar Lillian's school uniform, there was no sign of her customary aura. Was this person really Ogasawara Sachiko-sama?

"I wonder if I'm dreaming."

Sachiko-sama reached both her arms out, as though stretching.

"Onee-sama."

Yumi rushed over, and jumped into those open arms. But Sachiko-sama's body was a lot thinner, and weaker, than usual, almost as though she would snap in two. So Yumi pulled her onnee-sama towards her and embraced her tightly.

"This is a dream."

Sachiko-sama said, again.

"No, onnee-sama. I'm here."

Yumi released the embrace, so that Sachiko-sama could see her face clearly.

"But in my dream, my onnee-sama said that she'd bring you to me."

Apparently Sachiko-sama thought that she'd only dreamed the request she made to Youko-sama.

"Right. But, here I am."

"Is that you, Yumi?"

Sachiko-sama's fingers gently stroked Yumi's cheek. As though to confirm that Yumi really was there.

Softly, softly, as though she were touching valuable glass-work.

"I'm sorry, onnee-sama."

Yumi instinctively took hold of Sachiko-sama's hands and squeezed tightly. Sadly, even her fingers felt gaunt.

"I was only being selfish during such a difficult time for you onnee-sama. I caused you so much trouble."

"You're not to blame, Yumi. I was wrong. Because I couldn't – "

"No."

If Yumi had only believed in her unconditionally, none of this would have happened.

Despite hitting rock bottom, Yumi had been able to quickly recover. But for her – such were Yumi's thoughts as she supported that frail body.

Slender, exhausted, and grief stricken. Forgetting things like eating when left alone, and so withdrawn into her own world that the boundary between dreams and reality had blurred.

Until now, Sachiko-sama had always been a strict person, relentlessly driving herself. But now she was weak, unable to surface under her own power.

"Onee-sama."

"You'll still call me that?"

"Of course."

For Yumi, there was only one person in her life that she'd ever call "onee-sama," and that was Ogasawara Sachiko-sama.

"You'll forgive me?"

Sachiko-sama smiled weakly.

"There's nothing to forgive."

Yumi hastily shook her head.

From what Sayako oba-sama said, neither was in the wrong, they were just not connecting with each other. Now the only regret remaining was that she couldn't have stayed dependable just a little bit longer. As her petit soeur, Yumi was supposed to cover for Sachiko-sama when she wasn't in complete control of her emotions.

"While my grandmother was still alive, I told myself that it couldn't be helped, that you were the sacrifice. I told myself that you would understand. But that was naïve. You're a living human, you get hurt, and you get disappointed. What kind of an onee-sama am I, that I wouldn't notice something so obvious?"

A flood of tears came gushing out of Sachiko-sama. As though all the tears that she couldn't cry while her grandmother was critically ill, or after she'd died, came bursting out at once.

"If only you'd told me."

Yumi took a handkerchief from her pocket and held it up to Sachiko-sama's cheek.

"My grandmother told me not to say anything to you."

Sachiko-sama said, the handkerchief halting the stream of tears.

"Huh?"

"Because she loved you, Yumi."

"Even though we never met?"

"Yes. I suppose it is odd. She always said not to talk about her illness. I think that's probably because she didn't want to worry her friends."

It was a strange feeling for Yumi. Somebody she'd never even met liked her. On top of that, by the time she heard of it, she was never going to be able to meet that person for all eternity.

"I was really looking forward to going to the amusement park with you, Yumi. So, I wanted to go. It probably looked to you as though I was breaking our promise, or being wishy-washy, but I wanted it to happen soon because my grandmother was looking forward to hearing about it too. Those were my honest feelings. But then my grandmother's condition took a sudden turn for the worse, and when I found out I rushed over to the hospital."

So she may have wanted to talk, but she couldn't say anything to Yumi. For some reason, the words of Katou-san came back to her at that point. Katou-san had said that when her father had collapsed, there had been no room for her emotions. That there had been nothing she wanted to say, and no-one she wanted to listen.

So, even if Sachiko-sama hadn't been told not to by her grandmother, she may not have said anything to Yumi. Because Sachiko-sama loved her grandmother, Yumi thought she may not have wanted to admit that she was in hospital.

That showed even in the clothes she was wearing. Certainly, the school uniform was a convenient garment to wear for a memorial service, but Sachiko-sama's family wouldn't have had any trouble procuring a mourning dress. That they hadn't done so was probably because they hated the thought of preparing for this.

Even if they're resigned to it, some things are hard to admit and accept.

Of course, that was all just speculation on Yumi's part.

"Whenever I spoke about you to my grandmother, I think it took her back to her youth."

Sachiko-sama looked around the darkened room before she said this. As though she was checking that her grandmother wasn't present.

"So that's why she thought of me as a friend."

Yumi said, and Sachiko-sama answered with, "Yes," and sat down on the bed. She patted the space beside her, inviting Yumi to sit down too.

"But I think, deep down, she was waiting for her friend to come and visit her."

"She was waiting?"

Yumi sat down on the bed too. It had probably been the bed that Sachiko-sama's grandmother had used, but she didn't dislike that. Actually, Yumi was delighted by it, because it felt like she was getting closer to Sachiko-sama's grandmother.

"Not for you, Yumi, but for her real friend."

Sachiko-sama explained that her grandmother would occasionally, when rambling incoherently, call out her old friend's name. She would also say, "I miss her."

She didn't want people to find out, so they wouldn't worry. – Despite this, she still had that feeling of longing.

"So I found her phone number from the Lillian's graduate contact list and called her from the hospital. Unfortunately, that lady was – "

"What happened?"

Yumi called out instinctively. Sachiko-sama was taken aback by the force of the question, and faltered as she answered.

"She wasn't at home."

"Ah, not at home."

Yumi felt a bit deflated, which was quickly followed by embarrassment. What on earth had she been expecting?

"The house-sitter told me she was traveling. By this point my grandmother's condition had deteriorated to the point where she was near-death, so even if I waited until the lady returned and asked her to visit, she may not have made it in time. I hung up the phone, dejected. Then when I

turned around, what do you think I saw? You wouldn't believe it, but there she was, standing right there."

"Oh ... "

"There was my grandmother's friend. She and I both realized it straight away. Because when she saw me, she said, "Saiko-san.***"

Sachiko-sama's excitement made her speak faster.

"My grandmother's name was Saiko. That lady was traveling to the hospital to visit my grandmother."

Miracle. Fate. Those words spun around Yumi's head. Then Sachiko-sama suddenly said, "Say, do you believe in miracles?"

"That lady told me that long ago they had a fight and separated. So she never thought they'd meet again their entire lives. But a few days ago, she suddenly thought back to those days and really wanted to see my grandmother again. So she made some inquiries as to her whereabouts. As though she'd heard my grandmother's pleas. No, it was as though their hearts were drawing them together."

Just then, a woman's face floated into Yumi's mind. Holding a white parasol, heading out saying she was going to set things right with an old friend, an old lady with a sunny smile.

"When my grandmother saw that lady's face she was overjoyed, and her condition seemed to improve temporarily. When they parted, they were both content, even though they knew they'd never see each other again. Not long after that my grandmother passed away, but she had such a serene look on her face."

For she no longer had any regrets. She was able to recover what she'd lost so long ago.

"That started me thinking. Right at the end, my grandmother was able to free herself from her regrets. What about me? If I died right then, could I claim that I had no regrets?"

Sachiko-sama gripped the handkerchief tightly in her fist and covered her eyes. The tears that had stopped temporarily were flooding out again.

"No, I had my regrets. That's why I had to see you, I had to tell you."

Tears soaked through the gaps between her fingers, down the palm and back of her hand, onto her wrist.

"Onee-sama..."

"I love you."

During that downpour, Yumi had thought that it would be better if she disappeared. But if she had disappeared, she never would have been able to receive these wonderful words from Sachiko-sama.

"I love you too onee-sama."

She never would have been able to convey this important message to Sachiko-sama.

Never again would she compare herself to Touko-chan.

Seeing those tears, she would believe her onee-sama no matter what.

She said that I was the only one.

Sachiko-sama's one and only petit soeur.

Yumi thought, "Ahh, so that's how it was."

Yumiko-san had seen through the situation. That's why she had declared, "If you still love her, things will be fine."

Don't mock the wisdom of the elderly. For they are more experienced in life.

"You know, I'm feeling a bit hungry."

Sachiko-sama suddenly mumbled.

"Then you should tell your mother, and she'll get you something. I'm sure she'll be delighted."

Yumi led Sachiko-sama by the hand.

Joyously.



Perhaps Sachiko-sama's metabolism was getting back to normal after all that crying. At the very least, Sachiko-sama's appetite returning was something to be happy about.

"What is it?"

Sachiko-sama asked, looking at Yumi's grinning mouth.

"No, it's nothing."

Yumi hurriedly covered her mouth. Now that she'd been spotted, if she said something like, "I'm just happy that your appetite is back," then Sachiko-sama was likely to act perverse and respond with, "Well now I'm not hungry anymore."

"Such a strange girl."

"Yes."

Yumi opened the door and let Sachiko-sama go first.

"Your grinning is disturbing, stop it."

"Yes."

She'd been scolded by her onee-sama. What bliss.

Raindrops started to appear here and there on a hallway window.

But for now, Yumi felt like taking a walk with a parasol, not an umbrella.

Part 6.

In the living room, when Sayako oba-sama heard of Sachiko-sama's hunger, it was as though she'd witnessed a miracle, she was that surprised.

"Yumi-chan, you're like an appetite promoting medicine."

What looked like freshly prepared black tea was placed at the table.

Yumi prayed at the small altar covered in white flowers, then helped herself to some tea. In the portrait, Sachiko-sama's grandmother was smiling so vividly it was as though she was alive and breathing within the photograph.

"Oh, what happened to Youko-sama?"

The only people visible in the living room where Sayako oba-sama and Kashiwagi-san.

"Weren't you going for a stroll together?"

She asked Kashiwagi-san.

"We did for a while. Then, suddenly, she headed out the main gate on her own. Said she'd be back soon. I thought I'd go with her, but she bluntly turned me back."

He answered, his expression showing he wasn't amused.

She would have said, "Keep away from me." Yumi could just picture the scene between the two of them.

"It looked like she suddenly thought of something."

Yumi thought that Youko-sama simply didn't want Kashiwagi-san around any longer, but she didn't say this. Instead she stirred the waters by saying, "It's rainy out though."

Whereupon.

"My onee-sama has an umbrella with her so she'll be fine."

Sachiko-sama asserted. Given her personality, there was no way Youko-sama wouldn't have a folding umbrella in her bag during the current season. Sachiko-sama didn't actually say this, but that's surely what she meant.

Everyone agreed, then Sayako oba-sama cheerfully closed in on Sachiko-sama.

"Hey, Sachiko-san. Where to?"

In her hand she had a number of thin booklets fanned out like playing cards. On closer inspection, they were all take-away menus.

There was a lunch catering shop, a noodle shop, a sushi shop, a katsudon shop and a shop specializing in eel. There was even a menu from a cafe.

"So, we're going to get takeaway. From here?"

"Well, there's only enough to make tea in this house. You should know that."

Apparently it had only been Sachiko-sama's grandmother living in the house, and it had been mainly vacant since her hospitalization. From time to time Sayako oba-sama or Sachiko-sama would come to check the mail, or air out the place, or other things like that, but there was never any need to stock the house with food.

"On the way back from the crematorium, didn't father and grandfather get sandwiches because they said they were getting hungry? Can't we eat those?"

Sachiko-sama asked, not backing down.

"But you told them you didn't want any because you weren't hungry, remember? So they took the rest with them."

"They took them? So, where are they?"

"At work."

"It's Sunday, right?"

"They were just rattling around here, so I let them go to work."

"... Ah, so that's it."

While Sachiko-sama had made a revival, she didn't have the will to follow them to their company just to reclaim some sandwiches.

"I've got it. How about this."

Sayako oba-sama clapped her hands together, as though she'd just hit upon a good idea.

"Why don't we all go to a restaurant? Let's see, what about that place you like in Ginza? Oh right, reservations, reservations. I wonder if I wrote their phone number in my notebook."

"I don't really want French food."

Sachiko-sama said peeishly.

Well, that was probably true. Yumi could understand. A (Japanese) person who was about to have their first decent meal after eating very little for a while probably wouldn't dare to choose French food.

Better to go with vegetables and rice or noodles, as those were easier on the stomach. As she was thinking about this, Yumi suddenly found herself feeling hungry. Come to think of it, since she'd been picked up by Youko-sama straight after cleaning, she hadn't eaten lunch today. And it was after 3 o'clock.

"If we went back to the estate, we could make something, but I'm sure takeaway would be quicker."

Sayako oba-sama's face showed her consternation.

"Well, I could go get something and bring it back."

Kashiwagi-san elegantly stood up.

"Something?"

What, and from where, Yumi asked.

"On the way in we passed a convenience store, right? I'll take the car for a spin and pick something."

Indeed, right before they turned off onto the side road there had been a convenience store on the main road. Getting something from there would certainly be quicker than takeaway or going to a restaurant.

"Just like a man."

Sayako oba-sama was openly praising him, but Yumi couldn't meekly go along with her. It was just a smidge galling that Kashiwagi-san would get the credit. However, Yumi knew full well that that was simply jealousy.

"I don't know what they have, but please get something that Sachiko can eat."

Just as Kashiwagi-san was about to accept some of the money that Sayako oba-sama was offering.

"I'm back."

A voice came from the entrance.

"Ah, Youko-sama."

"Oh, Yumi-chan, is that you? Can you come here please."

"Okay?"

Knowing nothing more, Yumi headed to the entrance where she found a wet Youko-sama wiping the door with a handkerchief.

"You didn't have an umbrella?"

"I had too many bags, so I couldn't use it all that well."

Youko-sama smiled wryly, at her feet were two bulging bags from the convenience store.

"What's this?"

"Food."

"Oowah."

Peeking inside the bag she'd been handed, Yumi gasped in delight. Frozen udon noodle broth, onigiri rice balls, cup-a-soup and a bread roll. All sorts of food jumped into view.

"Even with just this, there should be something that Sachiko will want to eat."

"Incredible, Youko-sama. But how did you know?"

How did she know that Sachiko-sama's appetite would return so soon.

"I'm not just posing as Ogasawara Sachiko's onee-sama."

Youko-sama puffed up with pride.

"I guess not."

That was Youko-sama. As she carried the large bag Yumi felt happier. Kashiwagi-san hadn't been up to the task. He was tens, no, hundreds of steps behind.

As she walked behind Yumi, Youko-sama called in to the living room like a snack salesman on the bullet train.

"Ladies. We have food on offer. What would you like?"

It goes without saying that Sayako oba-sama gleefully bought the whole lot.

And so, they all shared a late lunch together.

They gave the bread roll to the poor chauffeur, for despite the effort he put into polishing the car, it still got wet in the rain.

Sayako oba-sama and Sachiko-sama both regarded the frozen udon noodle broth with curiosity, and after it had been heated and an offering made to Sachiko-sama's grandmother, lapped it up.

"We haven't had a fun lunch like this since Yumi-chan and everyone came to visit for New Year's."

It didn't feel like Sayako oba-sama was simply excited about tasting something she wasn't used to: common people's food. She got a bit too merry, and stained her valuable mourning dress with broth.

"Convenience stores are such handy restaurants."

To a degree, that should have been expected.

Sayako oba-sama was even more of an alien than Sachiko-sama.

Beneath a Clear, Blue Sky

Part 1.

"And so?"

Yoshino-san asked, taking a deep breath, atop the third-floor of the fire-escape staircase attached to the outside of the school building.

"In the end, things went back to how they were before? Everyone's concerns were dropped."

"Hehehe."

Unusually, a clear, blue sky spread out overhead. As before, a rosary hung around Yumi's neck.

"At they very least, I wonder if Sachiko-sama's grandmother's friend and your Yumiko-san were one and the same person."

"Who knows."

On that point, it wasn't exactly clear. Yumi thought she'd probably find out eventually, but she also felt she was happy enough not to know too.

"You'd know if you asked Sachiko-sama what the name of the friend was, right?"

"Yeah, but."

Yumi swayed the bag containing her lunchbox.

"I don't want to tamper too much with a fairytale story."

Like, for instance, what kind of a journey her blue umbrella had been on. There was no point in going out of her way to try and find out. She wanted the fact of it returning to her hand to remain precious.

"I think I kind of understand."

Yoshino-san quietly agreed.

"But I'll probably go and see Yumiko-san again."

Yumi had to report that she'd made up with her onnee-sama.

Taking Maple Parlor sweets with her. Listening to trivial stories. Telling rambling stories.

"You two seem to quite carefree."

Sachiko-sama looked up and called to them from the entrance to the Rose Mansion. Squinting, shading her eyes from the dazzling sunlight with her hand. But to Yumi, it was her onnee-sama that looked dazzling.

"Hurry up, we've got a lot of work to do."

A mountain of it, in fact. Ignoring that much of it was caused by her own absence, Sachiko-sama swaggered magnificently. She was in fine form. Basically, a complete recovery.

"Okaaay."

Yumi and Yoshino-san responded, then started down the emergency staircase.

They were giving up their lunch break to work on the preparations for the school festival today too.

Part 2.

One morning, on the way to school, she spotted Yumiko-san from inside the bus.

Holding a white parasol, slowly walking down the street.

She looked like someone enjoying a regular morning walk, and Yumi's chest was filled with happiness witnessing that scene.

Sachiko-sama commuted to school from her grandmother's house for a short while, but it wasn't long before she started thinking about moving back to the Ogasawara estate.

"Because, since then, all my mother does is go to the convenience store, and all we eat is that udon noodle broth. I can't take any more."

Her grandfather and father were probably feeling lonely, so perhaps it was the right time for everyone.

But moving back to their house may not put an end to Sayako oba-sama's trips to the convenience store. Convenience stores were scattered all throughout the country. There was bound to be one in Sachiko-sama's suburb.

In accordance with her fixed-term contract, Touko-chan stepped down from the role of assistant when Sachiko-sama returned to school. In order to devote herself to her acting, now that they were looking towards the autumn school festival. She still came to visit them in the Rose Mansion from time to time, whenever the mood struck her.

Familiarity was a terrifying thing, for Yumi didn't feel the same dislike as earlier. No, perhaps it was composure.

Shimako-san and Noriko-chan showed that they were the innocent young couple they very much appeared to be, while the established pair of Yoshino-san and Rei-sama continued to spend their days like an old married couple.

As for Yumi.

Secretly, she thought that she should buy a parasol that summer. While she knew that a black umbrella would be better to stop the sun, she already had her heart set on a white, lace parasol.

Soon, the rainy season would clear out.

When it did, beneath the dazzling sun, she'd hold that parasol aloft and set out with her onee-sama.

Afterword

Things I've recently seen from my window:
Ants walking across the screen door.
Small black and orange caterpillars on the leaves of the tallest tree near the house.

White-eye birds come to eat them.

Completely unrelated to them, noisy crows.

A stray cat taking no notice of any of this, and having a leisurely nap atop the fence.

Akebi fruits, fully-grown, about the size of a pinky finger.

– At any rate, it's peaceful. The rainy season has yet to arrive.

Hello, this is Konno.

The previous book, "Rainy Blue," ended with Yumi in a tragic spot, so I'm sure there were a lot of people that thought, "Huh, you're cutting it there!?" Actually, I got a lot of letters about this. Sorry for causing you distress.

– Start with something like that.

This book, "Holding a Parasol," could probably be called a conclusion to "Rainy Blue," as it's intended to settle the debts from the previous book. I'm sorry for making you all wait so long. No, I suppose the wait was longest for Yumi, frozen in place with the rain pelting down on her.

That troublesome final scene. It's not like the pages were all there and the manuscript arbitrarily chopped at that point. From the outset, that was how I thought I'd end it.

So, while they may form a continuation, for some reason I thought they were also independent. Or maybe I formed that conclusion just because I wanted them to have different titles.

In "Rainy Blue," there were three stories in the one book. And, obviously, I didn't want to continue the negative connotations of "blue" forwards into the next book.

So, while they aren't Part 1 and Part 2, the two books have an inseparable relationship. Basically, they're like soeurs, I suppose. Looking at it that way, I'm grateful. The symbol of "Rainy Blue" would be the rain umbrella, and, for "Holding a Parasol," it's the sun umbrella from the title. Even if they're the same umbrella, the damp and the dry are completely different. That's the kind of feeling I wanted to evoke. Just having the word 'parasol' has a forward-looking feel, and the writer can write with more energy.

Now then.

The story is not over, so I'm sure there will be plenty of speculation from the readers about the current developments and mysteries. This time around, the largest volume of responses was undoubtedly about "Sachiko-sama's secret." (I haven't really solicited responses. These were all from people taking the initiative). Speculation about why Sachiko-sama was standing Yumi up, and just what on earth Touko-chan was doing.

Here's some examples:

#1: "Is Sachiko-sama taking driving lessons so that she can drive to the amusement park?"

... Satou Sei got her license while she was still in high-school, so it's worthwhile considering. In that case, if Sachiko had her provisional license then she could practice on the road with Kashiwagi Suguru's support. That's how Touko's added. But, if she were the one driving, she wouldn't get carsick, usually.

#2: "Sachiko-sama's been practicing so that she can ride the roller coaster."

... Just what type of practice has she been doing? Riding a roller coaster non-stop? I laughed, and this may be letting the cat out of the bag, but I'm

not sure the readers were laughing. That's putting the cart before the horse. And to abandon Yumi in "Rainy Blue" for that, it's just too sad.

#3: "I don't know the reason, but I'm sure Sachiko-sama has a good one."

... There were a lot of people who immediately thought that. Surprisingly, there were an equally large number of people booing, saying, "Sachiko-sama's horrible," and that she shouldn't be trusted. When my supervisor read "Rainy Blue," she got angry, saying, "What's going on with Sachiko's personality?" (lol)

Receiving the jeers alongside Sachiko was Touko. But I don't think Touko really did anything wrong. Despite this, I got a huge number of letters begging me, "Please don't make her Yumi-chan's petit soeur." Reading the letters I'd quip, "Well, how about Yoshino then?"

Just to be clear, everyone, I am in no way thinking about having Yoshino and Touko become soeurs. Since, as Yoshino said herself, their characters collide. Hmm.

I had considered adding the full story of the blue umbrella and white parasol to this book if there was space, but I had to pass that up. I do have some provisional material, but what I'll do with that from here on out is undecided.

It might get written some time, some place. But, like Yumi said at the end, I don't think there's any reason to force it.

Konno Oyuki.